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classic gamer magazine

Vol 2 Issue 1
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Reviews

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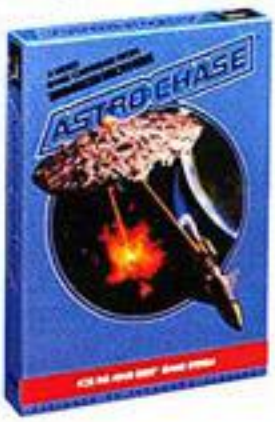

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classic gamer magazine

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RESET

"ON WITH THE SHOW"

Volume 2, Issue 1
April 2004

Editor-in-Chief
Chris Cavanaugh
cav@classicgamer.com

Managing Editors
Scott Marriott
scomar@classicgamer.com

Skyler Miller
skyler@classicgamer.com

Writers and Contributors
Jason Buchanan
Earl Green
Darryl Guenther
Mark Hoogland
Scott Marriott
Skyler Miller
Michael Roode
Lee K. Seitz
Tim Snider
Kyle Snyder
Brett Weiss

Layout and Design
Skyler Miller
Chris Cavanaugh

CONTACT INFORMATION
Classic Gamer Magazine
feedback@classicgamer.com
http://www.classicgamer.com

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"Let's start up Classic Gamer Magazine again." My initial reaction was to curl into the fetal position under my desk as flashbacks of folding and stapling and envelope stuffing and paper cuts rushed to my head. But Skyler Miller has a very convincing way about him. He believed we could make it fly by offering it as an electronic document and distributing it for free, and he got me excited about getting this magazine back on its feet.

We then recruited Scott Marriott who took to the idea like Popeye on spinach. Soon familiar names were back in the fold -- Earl Green, Tim Snider, Kyle Snyder, and Brett Weiss -- and we were once again rolling.

It was decided that we would rethink the idea of what defines a *Classic Gamer*. The easy route is to pigeonhole us into a crowd that's stuck in the past playing YARS' Revenge while feverishly clutching our Adventure carts. Yet the reality is that Classic Gamers tend to be the most knowledgeable and dedicated game players there are. We play no favorites. PlayStation 2, Xbox, GameCube, Atari 2600, and Intellivision are all just fine as long as the games are good. So with that in mind, we'll be expanding our coverage to include all consoles and computers, while featuring games we think will be of interest to Classic Gamers.

This issue features a number of fun articles and reviews including "Rare Games: Treasure or Trash?," an in-depth review of Crystal Chronicles for GameCube, and "Games of Fame," which answers the nagging question of what video games celebrities play when they aren't making scads of money.

But before I end this column I want to take a moment to publicly thank Skyler Miller and Scott Marriott for lighting a fire under my ass to get this project going again. They have my eternal gratitude for the unbelievable amount of work they have put into this. Also to Earl Green and Tim Snider who have been this magazine's greatest cheerleaders. Of course a huge thank you goes out to all of our dedicated readers who have stuck with us since the start. Feel free to drop us a line and let us know how we're doing since we obviously can't do this without you.

….now, where were we?

-Cav
feedback@classicgamer.com

CGM Editors and Contributors

An avid game enthusiast and collector, ***Scott Alan Marriott*** worked as All Game Guide's senior editor before switching gears to become a freelance writer. Making his *Classic Gamer Magazine* debut, Scott's other writing credits include reviews and previews at TechTV's *X-Play*.

Skyler Miller's work has appeared on Salon.com, TechTV's X-Play, GameSpot, and All Game Guide. In 2001, he was interviewed by CBC Radio about the 40th anniversary of the first computer game.

Earl Green is the webmaster of www.theLogBook.com, which covers music, movies, DVDs, classic video games, books, and toy collecting. He has written for All Game Guide, and has a regular column at *Digital Press.* Earl has also been called upon for expert opinions on everything from Star Trek to driving games by such newspapers as the Las Vegas Sun and the Baltimore Sun.

Kyle Snyder was *Classic Gamer Magazine's* first writer to come on board and has contributed faithfully ever since. Also a rabid arcade game collector, Kyle has written articles for *Game Room Magazine.*

Michael Roode is making his inaugural appearance in *Classic Gamer Magazine* with his article *Memories of PlayCable.*

Jason Buchanan is a die-hard movie and pop culture fan. His work appears on All Game Guide and All Movie Guide. He is making his debut in *Classic Gamer Magazine.*

Lee K. Seitz is very active in the classic gaming community. He ran the popular Classic Videogame Nexus website for five years and has written for Suite 101.

An avid comic collector and video game player, ***Brett Weiss*** has written extensively for *Comics Buyer's Guide* and the All Game Guide.

RTS and FPS fan extraordinaire, ***Mark Hoogland*** has written numerous descriptions and reviews for All Game Guide. He is making his debut in *Classic Gamer Magazine* with his review of Tron 2.0

Tim Snider is the Editor-in-Chief of a medical journal and is responsible for the wonderfulness that is *Venture II: The Abysmal Abyss* for the Atari 2600. Tim has a regular column at Digital Press.

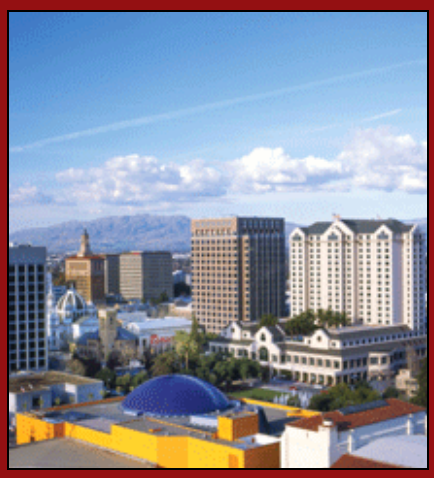
Darryl Guenther is back for an encore after writing "Doin' the Donkey Kong" way back in issue #1.

Special Thanks

Chris Cavanaugh: I would like to thank Sarah Thomas for not killing me for being on the computer so much. Joe Santulli for his support, and of course my parents who always believe in me.
Scott Marriott: Special thanks to Cav and Skyler -- two of the brightest, most energetic people I've had the pleasure of working with -- for letting me in on this shindig. Another thank you goes to my wife for not filing for divorce after losing a completely good room to games and magazines. Hopefully, she won't look in the basement.
Skyler Miller: Thanks to my wife for "letting" me play games whenever I want, my mom for being an Atari 2600 player before I was, and my sister for always being on the cutting edge. Props to Cav for being the true originator, and Scott for being one of the best game critics out there.

NEWS ROUNDUP

CGE 2K4 Venue Change



Gambling addicts may be disappointed, but Classic Gaming Expo is moving from its previous residence of Las Vegas to San Jose for this year's event. The move will allow for greater floor space (for a total of over 30,000 sq. ft!), making it easier for sponsors and guests to attend. CGE2K4 will be held August 21 and 22 at the San Jose McEnery Convention Center. For more details, visit www.cgexpo.com.

Northwest Classic Gaming Expo—May 8 & 9, 2004 If the Philly Classic seems like a distant memory and the Classic Gaming Expo feels as if it's ages away, take solace in the Northwest Classic Games Enthusiasts' annual expo, to take place May 8-9 at the SeaTac Holiday Inn in Seattle. Events include the annual Northwest Atari 2600 Championship on May 9. For more information, visit http://nwcge.org/nwcge2k4.htm

Polish your Joysticks Those using the Stella emulator (Stella!) can now enjoy Atari VCS games the way they're supposed to be played -- using an original Atari joystick. Thanks to the fine folks at Pixels Past and AtariAge, players can purchase a USB adaptor that recognizes compatible Atari 2600 joysticks, paddles, and driving controllers. In fact, any emulator that supports USB controllers will work, including MAME.
http://www.atariage.com/store/product_info.php?products_id=267

Digital Press Matures Wondering what else is out there for your Genesis, TurboGrafx, or Sega CD? Are you new to collecting scene? After years of publishing guides for 8-bit systems, Digital Press plugs into the 16-bit generation and beyond with its new book, Digital Press Collector's Guide: Advance Edition.
Order it here: http://www.digitpress.com/dpg_plug.htm

Cancelled Games The worst two words in the industry (other than game over) have been attached to the following classic updates, originally scheduled for release at some point in 2004: ***Sam and Max: Freelance Police*** [PC], ***Vectorman*** [PS2], and ***Full Throttle: Hell on Wheels*** [PC]. Be sure to light a candle for each, will you?

Avast ye Scurvy Scum! Those who voyaged with 1987's ***Pirates!*** on computer systems (or the subsequent ports on NES and Genesis) will be able to set sail once again with the much anticipated follow-up by legendary designer Sid Meier. A swashbuckling IGN preview can be found here:
http://pc.ign.com/articles/499/499119p1.html?fromint=1

The Final Frontier? Twenty-seven years after the original caused coin-shortages in Japan, ***Space Invaders*** is poised for a close encounter of the 3D kind. Billed as the first official sequel to the classic quarter-muncher, Taito's ***Space Raiders*** stars three spunky characters as they face off against an alien horde bent on stealing their Hostess Cupcakes. Okay, they really just want to destroy the world. Two modes of play include story and co-op survival, both of which feature "immersive 3D environments." Consider yourself warned.

Cheaper Games The best two words in the industry (other than press start) can now be applied to the GameCube's ***F-Zero X***, ***Metroid Prime***, ***Mario Golf: Toadstool Tour***, and ***Wario World***. Both ***F-Zero X*** and ***Metroid Prime*** have been reduced to $19.99, while ***Wario World*** and ***Mario Golf*** will be discounted to $29.99. The savings begin April 29th.

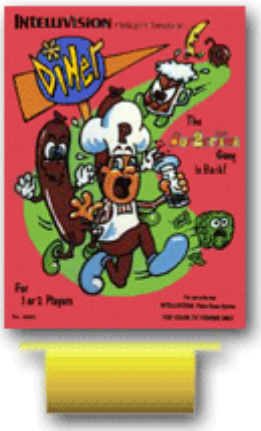
Mario Madness You might have missed it, but DIC Entertainment released three DVDs featuring Nintendo's famous plumber (and a certain blond-haired elf) in 2003. Fans of the animated Super Mario Bros. Super Show! will be pleased to know more DVDs of the classic series are on the way in 2004.

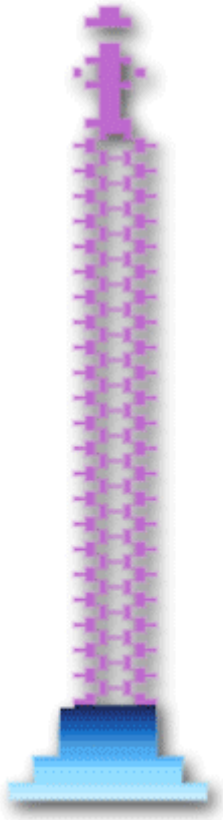
There's a New Kid in Town *Manci Games*, a new monthly print magazine dedicated to classic games, launched in March with a 40-page issue featuring Pitfall Harry on the cover. The full-color magazine will include developer interviews, retro reviews, and other fun stuff. To learn more, point your browsers to the following address: http://www.mancigames.com/

Silas Warner Dies Silas Warner, most famous as the programmer of ***Castle Wolfenstein*** on the Apple II, died on Feb. 26 of kidney failure. His long career included programming work on ***Red Storm Rising*** and ***Silent Service***, and he served as the lead programmer for ***The Terminator*** on Sega CD for Virgin Games. He also worked for the Sega Network in the late '90s.

Rare Games

Treasure or Trash?





We've all been there. The big eBay find we waited for *years* to bag. The dodgy game of concealing from our loved ones how much we'd just committed ourselves to shell out for a Really Rare Game that we *could've* gotten for only thirty bucks way back when -- *if* we'd been shopping at Sears, or if we had all the proof-of-purchase stickers from a certain brand of dog food. But we weren't on the ball back then. But by golly we are now, even with the daunting "R9" next to the title of what we've just bought. And then, one embarrassingly large money order and one week later, it arrives in the mail and subsequently arrives in a waiting cartridge slot.

And it *sucks*. Oh, but dear *Lord,* how it *sucks*.

Congratulations. You just fell for the okeydoke. It's rare, so you *must* have it, and then you find out why it's rare: because nobody, back in the day, deemed it worth keeping, and rightly so. But not all rare games are the digital equivalent of a festering dog-pile. Some of them actually downright playable — some of them are *worth* what you paid…or at least a significant portion of what you paid.

Here, then, *Classic Gamer Magazine* attempts to sort the wheat from the chaff, and tries to categorize for you what is a must-have-because-it's-fun and what is merely a must-have-because-nobody-thinks-there-are-many-of-them-around. This isn't intended to replace or adjust anyone else's rarity ratings, but is simply meant to serve as a supplement. If you're collecting only for rarity, then by all means, chase that chuckwagon. But if you're collecting for rarity *and* play value… sometimes it's a whole different story.

Turtles

After licensing things like the Pink Panther cartoons, Power Lords action figure characters and Barnum & Bailey's Circus, apparently the Odyssey 2 gamesmiths decided they were ready to go way out on a limb and license an actual arcade game. Based on a Stern maze-chase coin-op that no doubt fed on the ***Pac-Man*** craze, ***Turtles*** puts players in charge of Mama Turtle as she searches for her baby turtles in a maze, and tries to avoid deadly bugs while taking the babies to a safe home. The graphics aren't elaborate, but they don't need to be (this game wasn't really eye-popping in the arcade, so it's no great loss). Amusingly, ***Turtles*** makes use of the Voice module to create in-game *music,* something the underpowered O2 could scarcely do for itself, and players will find it either funny or grating. With or without the music, however, ***Turtles*** is enough fun to recommend shelling out the dough for it.

- Earl Green

Power Lords

The final North American release for the Odyssey 2 console, ***Power Lords*** is a surprising numb-thumb delight like few other games seen on this system. Players assume the role of comic book hero Adam Power, piloting an agile rocket sled in an attempt to dodge the endless rain of volcanic debris as well as the laser eyes of a giant serpent (a unique character who isn't part of the typical Odyssey 2 character set), while also trying to blast that serpent and its minions. A gravity vortex also occasionally threatens to drag the rocket sled to its doom in the heart of the volcano dominating the screen. While not insanely difficult, ***Power Lords*** will test the springs behind any Odyssey 2's action button, and despite a complete-in-box copy fetching over $100 in most cases, it's actually fun.

- Earl Green

Q*bert

One of four foreign-only games released by Parker Brothers, ***Q*bert*** is an Odyssey 2 rarity: an honest-to-goodness arcade translation, not a near-beer experience that's just close enough for government work. The pyramid playing field and its wacky residents have been scaled back graphically, but what ***Q*bert*** on the Odyssey 2 has going for it is sheer speed - and unlike the Atari 2600 version, it's not necessary to hold the Odyssey joysticks at a 45-degree angle. And in other surprising ways, it's even more like the arcade game than the 2600 version is, right down to including the animated interludes/game play examples between levels. A bit of a curate's egg, but worthwhile for Odyssey 2 completists. Either the Brazilian or European versions will work on North American consoles.

- Earl Green

Super Cobra

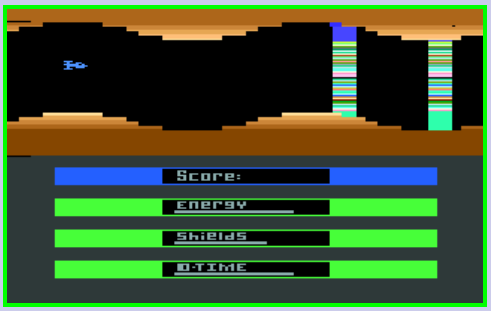
The lowest point of Parker Brothers otherwise decent Odyssey 2 arcade ports, ***Super Cobra*** is a game perhaps ill-advised for this console: graphics are clunky, scrolling is choppy, and the player's helicopter sprite is too large for the system's standard "explosion" graphic to take out all at once. European and Brazilian cartridges will both work on North American Odyssey 2 consoles, for what it's worth. As ardent as this system's fans are, even the staunchest Odyssey 2 champion would be hard-pressed to find an ounce of fun in this game. Completists only. Pick a good spot on the shelf -- it'll be staying there for a while.

- Earl Green

Laser Gates

A side-scrolling shooter in the tradition of arcade obstacle courses like ***Vanguard***, ***Laser Gates*** puts players in the unenviable position of running a gauntlet of force fields, "densepack shields" (through which a safe path must be shot, or else serious damage to the player's ship will result), all sorts of automatic defense systems, and free-flying enemies too. All the while, would-be space pilots must keep an eye on the fuel and shield gauges to make sure their mission won't be cut short by the next shot or daring maneuver. Sound familiar? This is what ***Zaxxon*** on the 2600 could have been -- only Coleco unwisely tried to make it a first-person shooter. As it is, ***Laser Gates*** boasts Imagic's usual audiovisual excellence, and it's as fun to play as it is to hunt down the semi-rare cartridge.

- Earl Green



Shuttle Orbiter

One of a trio of titles turned out by the war game wizards at Avalon Hill before they made a strategic retreat from the console gaming biz, ***Shuttle Orbiter*** is a nice little mission-based game that puts players at the controls of the Space Shuttle, tasked with retrieving and docking space station components, avoiding space debris and keeping the shuttle fueled up for multiple -- and fictional -- changes of orbit (the shuttle can't really do this on the scale implied by the game). Sharp hand-eye coordination will be required to find the game, let alone play it -- Avalon Hill's foray into video games was brief, and all three of the company's titles are hard to find. This one's worth the search.

- Earl Green

Mr. Do's Castle

A bold attempt at translating one of the arcade's all-time cult classics, ***Mr. Do's Castle*** for the 2600 even has a go at the music, while it's no ***Pitfall II***, it's better than you might expect. The gameplay isn't bad either, though sometimes it seems to be up to chance whether or not Mr. Do's hammer will dislodge a brick (and that can often cost one the game). Other than that, surprisingly, almost every element of the game is intact. This game, thanks to an odd distribution deal that saw it hitting only a few retail chains (including Sears), now commands top dollar prices, so it's really up to the collector whether or not it's worth it. It's a fun game, but is it $80-$90 worth of fun?

- Earl Green

Chase the Chuckwagon

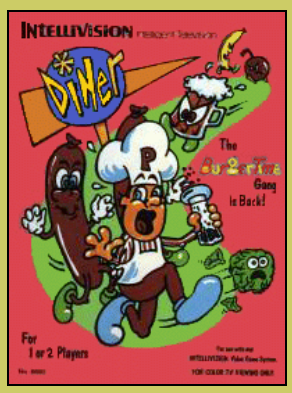
Despite it not being as rare as originally believed, its reputation of being in short supply has made it the poster child for Atari cartridge scarcities. Initially only available via mail order forms from packages of Ralston Purina dog food, this unoriginal ***Pac-Man*** clone sees you navigating a dog named Chuckie through a maze, while avoiding random objects and a mailman, in order to get to the chuckwagon at the top of the screen. If successful, a bonus round lets Chuckie earn reward points by eating from a dog bowl. ***Chase the Chuckwagon*** will certainly make for a nice conversation piece to a classic gaming collection, but its lackluster gameplay won't inspire any marathon play sessions. Even though generic maze games were the order of the day, whichever executive at Ralston Purina approved this idea should be smacked on the snoot with a rolled up newspaper.

- Cav

Diner

One of the Intellivision's rarer titles, ***Diner*** also has the distinction of being an exclusive sequel to 1982's ***BurgerTime***. Reportedly based on a work-in-progress version of ***Masters of the Universe II***, ***Diner*** plays like a combination of ***BurgerTime*** and ***Congo Bongo***. Once again you take on the role of Peter Pepper, this time out to satisfy hungry patrons by kicking "food balls" down ramps while avoiding evil, overgrown food. It may be a stretch to believe that the food balls are really such things as mashed potatoes, rice and macaroni (as the manual describes them), but ***Diner*** does a good job of extending the characters and concept of its predecessor into an entirely different style of gameplay.

-Skyler Miller



Pac-Man

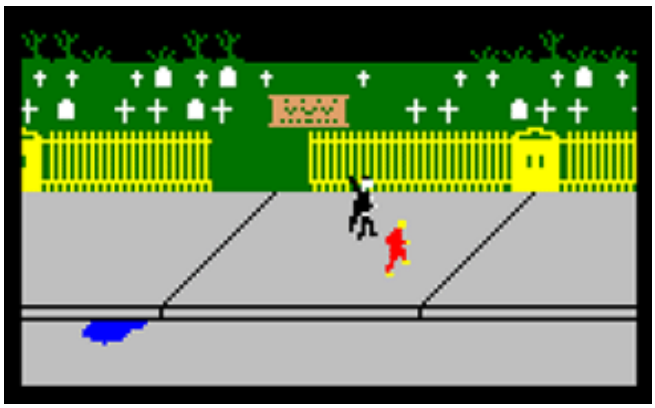
Introduced by Atari's Atarisoft wing (which translated popular Atari games and licenses for other consoles) and later re-released by the post-crash, restructured INTV Corp., this version of ***Pac-Man*** almost absolves Atari of its past Pac-sins. Not only does it look more like the real thing than the 2600 version does, but it even has the animated intermissions. There are some oddities to the maze itself -- such as narrow passages that can be traversed by neither Pac-Man nor monster - and it takes a while to get accustomed to controlling a little round thing with...well...a little round thing. But it's a good swipe at ***Pac-Man*** for one of the better home console also-rans. Who said you can only play the big arcade hits on the 2600?

- Earl Green

Dracula

One would assume that a game about Dracula would involve players fending off the prince of vampires and his minions. Imagic's creative answer to putting Bram Stoker's tragic character into pixels? The player *is* ***Dracula*** -- which means that one is meant to go around biting folks. Able to pound the pavement or cruise along in mid-air as a bat, Dracula scores more points for each victim he bites. Crucifixes and sunlight are not his friends, so there are actually limits for the player to heed. One of Imagic's coolest Intellivision titles, and also one of its better-packaged ones: this one's worth seeking in the box. Bloodsucking good fun.

-Earl Green



Truckin'

From Rick Levine, who delighted digital doctors everywhere with ***Microsurgeon***, is this excellent progenitor of the split-screen competitive racing genre. **Truckin'** is all about hauling a...large load of cargo cross-country in the shortest amount of time. Drivers have to be conscientious of other drivers on the highway (cars: they're not just speed bumps anymore!) and keep an eye on the gas gauge. Even most modern competitive racers stick to cars – as wacky as it may seem, ***Truckin'*** is further evidence that just about any idea could fly if it could also be made fun. Hard to find, but a title worth picking up with your next load.

-Earl Green

ATARI 5200

Star Trek: Strategic Operations Simulation

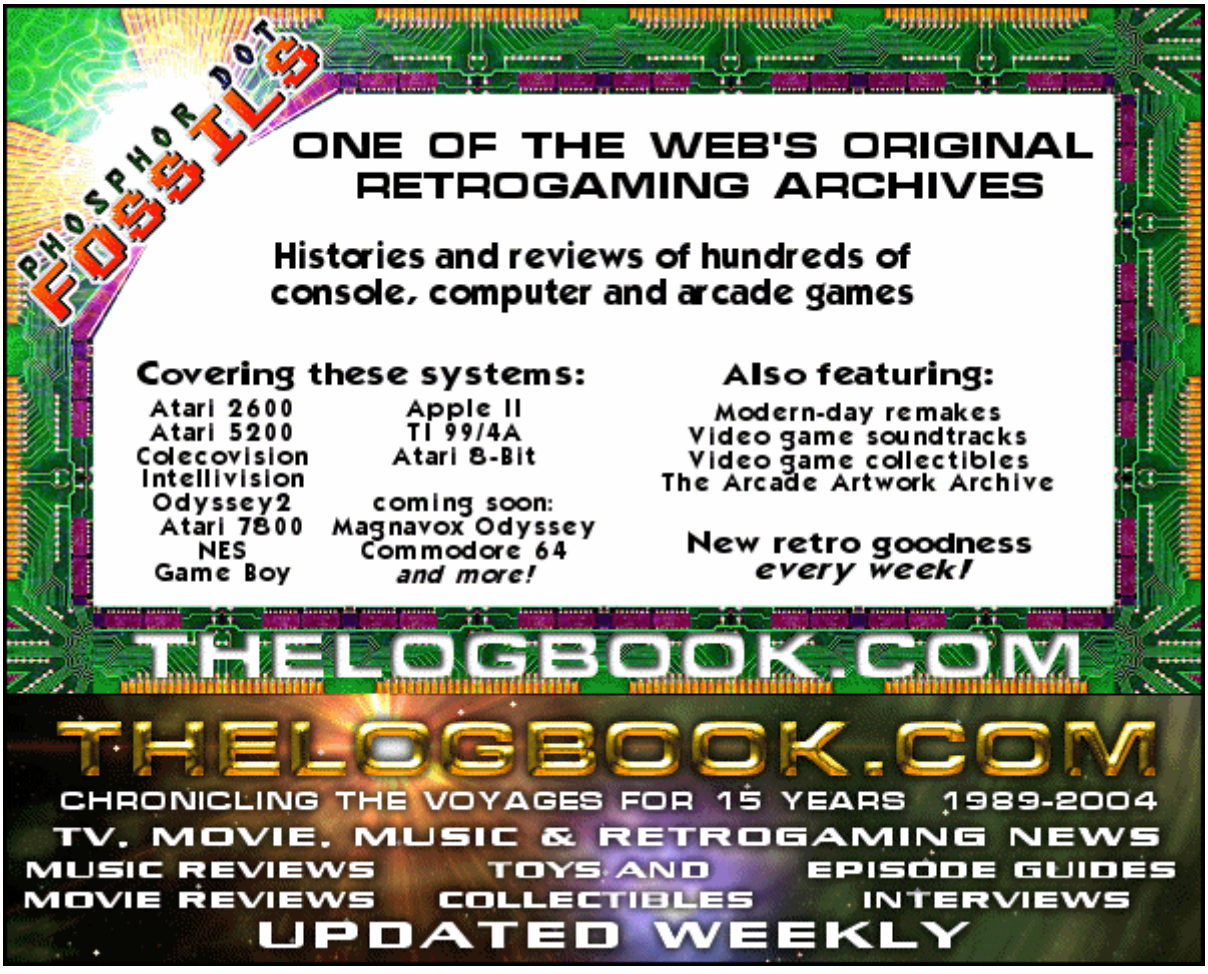
Put up the shields and hope this game doesn't get aboard. Barely even a step above the Atari 2600 version audio-visually, this home version of Sega's own cult hit coin-op robs players of any captain's chair vibe they might be hoping for by not using the keypad for *anything* during game play. That's right: the control scheme is essentially the same here as it is on the 2600, and at that rate, why not stick with the 2600 version if only for the less aggravating joystick? Possibly the beginning of the association between Star Trek games and Borg-cube-sized disappointment.

- Earl Green

Zaxxon

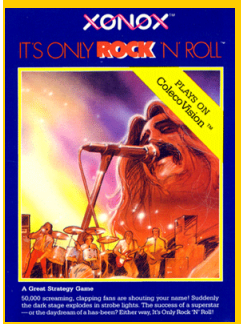
Essentially a close cousin of Sega's version of ***Zaxxon*** for the Atari home computers, ***Zaxxon*** isn't quite what you'd think it could be on the 5200. The controls are fairly easy to master if you're already accustomed to the 5200's joysticks, but graphically one might be expecting more from the much-hyped Supersystem. Still, the game is the thing, and while it's not going to make anyone's eyes pop out of their head, it is at the very least playable.

- Earl Green



It's Only Rock 'n' Roll

Without a doubt the worst game ever produced for the ColecoVision, ***It's Only Rock 'n' Roll*** is a one-player text and graphics (if you can call them that) simulation in which you live out your rock 'n' roll fantasies by forming a band and attempting to achieve fame, fortune and utter happiness. Unfortunately, no matter how many records you sell and no matter how popular you become, utter misery is more likely what you will find. IORNR is inept in every reviewable category. Writing songs is simply a matter of waiting for the computer to spew out such unfunny lines as "Why do I like raw steak?" and playing concerts is an entirely passive experience in which you are forced to sit and watch a blocky, stiffly animated band play a series of bleeps and bloops that sound nothing like rock (or any other kind of) music. Oftentimes, MTV will request a video from you *before* you have even written a song, and random events, such as you getting arrested for taking "suspicious substances," happen frequently and are an annoyance. Think of the marvelous rock parody *This is Spinal Tap* as written and directed by low budget schlockmeister Ed Wood and you'll have some idea what this game is all about.



- Brett Weiss

Sir Lancelot

Sir Lancelot puts you in the role of the title character, a princess-saving lad who is King Arthur's bravest knight. In a decidedly Joustian manner, you wield a charmed lance while riding a winged horse named Pegasus (as opposed to an ostrich as in ***Joust***). Instead of battling other jousters, you take on a number of different creatures, including monster bees, killer dragonflies and flying snakes. Every few levels there is a rescue screen in which you must pierce with your lance the heart of a giant dragon. Although similar to (i.e. a rip off of) ***Joust*****, *Sir Lancelot*** is missing many of the key elements of play that made the aforementioned 1982 arcade smash such a success, most notably platforms, eggs and the Troll of the Lava Pits. Also, there is no two-player simultaneous mode. The creature battles are competently designed as are the controls, and the graphics and animation are tolerable for a third-party title, but the game is ultimately nothing more than a wa-

- Brett Weiss

Chuck Norris Superkicks

"Keep off the grass!" would've made a good subtitle for ***Chuck Norris Superkicks*** as the famous martial arts expert suffers damage whenever you veer him off the pathway and into the weeds. Despite this unintentionally funny gameplay element, CNS is a decent title and upon its release was way ahead of its time, predating such early fighting games as ***Kung Fu*** and ***Kung-Fu Master*** by about a year. Your goal in ***Chuck Norris Superkicks*** is to reach an ancient monastery to rescue a famous leader who is being held hostage. At certain points along the pathway, the game will switch to a fighting screen in which you must punch and kick ninja assassins, some of which throw stars. As you progress, you will gain new fighting moves, such as somersault kicks. The first six levels are easy, but the seventh and final stage is challenging in that you must face numerous waves of especially fierce ninjas. Unfortunately, there is a time limit and the game will end before you want it to, no matter how valiantly you have fought. Another point of note about the seventh level is that it is much more impressive graphically than the rest of the game. *Overall,* ***Chuck Norris Superkicks*** is an uneven, but influential fighting contest that videogame historians should appreciate.

- Brett Weiss

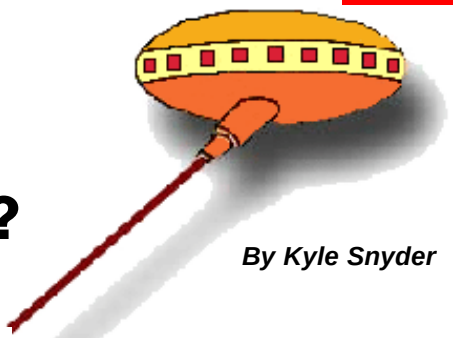
Flipper Slipper

Although touted as a pinball game, the oddly titled ***Flipper Slipper*** plays more like ***Breakout*** on acid. You control two curved flippers that slide back and forth in a paddle-like manner at the bottom of the screen. You must keep a ball in play as it bounces around a playfield that is littered with a variety of targets, including fish, a crab, a turtle, a beach house, a forest of tiny trees and a caged dog that you can let out. As with pinball and ***Breakout***, if you let the ball get past your flippers/paddles, you lose a life. ***Flipper Slipper*** is strange, but kind of dull. The flippers are awkward to control and there is a small gap on either side of the screen in which your flippers cannot quite reach. The targets are unusual for a game of this type, but they are crudely drawn and not much fun to aim for. I do like the fact that as the game progresses and gets more and more difficult, you must color coordinate your flippers to the ball. This is a clever touch. Fans of ***Breakout*** looking for something unusual may enjoy ***Flipper Slipper*** to a degree, but most others will simply scratch their heads and walk away.

- Brett Weiss

Laser Blast

Worth Another Look?



By Kyle Snyder

In my mind, the years had not been kind to ***Laser Blast***. I hadn't played the game in at least five years or so, and my opinion was getting clouded. I recalled the game as a stale shoot-em-up derivative with little to offer a seasoned 2600 player that had become accustomed to the likes of ***Solaris*** and ***Stargate***.

But I was very wrong. ***Laser Blast*** is an excellent early effort from David Crane, released one year before he went onto to create the historical ***Pitfall!*** in 1982.

It appears to be quite straightforward. Three bases rest on a hilly landscape, while a lone flying saucer hovers in the upper left of the night sky. Seems unfair, really. You outnumber the spaceship three to one! No lone alien invader can stand against your mighty arsenal! Until you hit the reset switch.

YOU are the spaceship and you've been given the task of wiping out all three bases before succumbing to their powerful ordinance. This twist seems to put your motives in question... are you (A) taking to the skies to defending your land against invading ground forces? (B) or taking the role of the villain, firing down on land-based weaponry in an effort to exterminate the pathetic creatures that inhabit this resource rich world? The latter choice, of course! Besides, you have much planned for the energy to be harvested from this mud ball of a planet. Destroy the opposition, milk this world dry, and use its power to fuel your ULTIMATE CONQUEST OF CYBERTRON!!!!! MWAH-HA-HA-HA-HA-HA-HAAAAAAAAaaaaaa.... (Mental note to self: Stop writing articles the morning after falling asleep on the couch while watching old *Transformers* episodes and drinking Southern Comfort and RC Cola!)

Okay, so maybe I tipped my hand a bit in what I personally believe the spaceship's motives are. Since you are attacking ground targets in this game, it seems quite the opposite of traditional video contests like ***Space Invaders*** and ***Missile Command*** where it is CLEAR who the good guys and bad guys are. The bad guys are ALWAYS in the sky, attacking down, and the good guys are the valiant fighters on the ground. But no matter, make up your own mind.

When the game begins, your spaceship can maneuver in roughly the top half of the screen. The bases on the ground move in tandem with one another and slowly shadow your movements. Periodically, one will extend a turret, and fire a laser beam into the sky. Assuming you are skilled enough to avoid the attack, another base will fire at you again in several seconds.

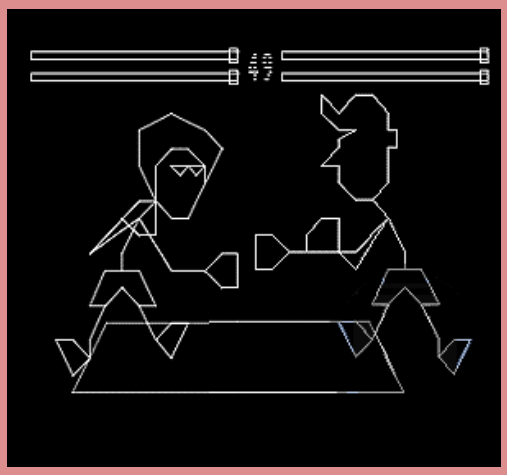
The early rounds are basic target practice. Maneuver your spaceship into position, press and hold the fire button to extend your laser cannon (you can also adjust your aim by pushing the joystick left or right at this point), and once you are on target, release the fire button to send a concentrated beam of pure energy smashing into the base on the ground, instantly destroying it, and adding anything from ten to ninety points to your score, depending on what screen you are playing. Clearing the ground of the three bases causes you to advance one screen, as three new bases drive onto the playing field. Each new screen slightly enhances the speed, firing frequency, and aiming ability of the ground bases, until you end up with some truly hideous little mofos to dog your every move. Additionally, each completed level reduces the amount of navigable flying space you have, until you are pinched into flying only back and forth with no vertical movement, along the top most "tier" of space.

A particularly nice touch is that the bases' lasers cripple your craft, but do not destroy it outright. What does that mean? That means REVENGE! When you are nailed by a ground base, your spaceship starts to flash colors and drop like a stone to the planet surface. Your ability to fire has been destroyed from the blast, however, you can STILL STEER! With a nudge of the joystick, your damaged spaceship can guide itself to crash right into the bastard that took you out! This is a very satisfying way of getting even with the enemy.

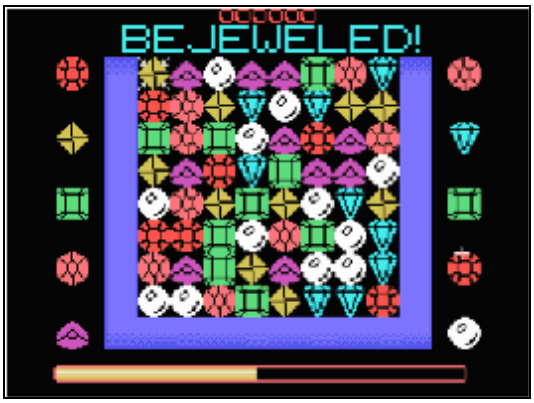
Laser Blast is a rather common title as far as rarity goes, but this is a good thing, because every classic gamer should have a copy of ***Laser Blast*** in his or her collection. Now, if you'll excuse me, I have to finish wiping the ground with these PUNY CREATURES AND CONTINUE PREPARING THESE ENERGON CUBES FOR TRANSPORT IN THE SPACE BRIDGE!!!!!

Vecsports Boxing

Programmer: Manu Parssinen
System: Vectrex



The Vectrex never saw much in the way of sporting titles (with the exception of ***Blitz!*** football), but ***Vecsports Boxing*** remedies this oversight. The game uses a side-on view of a boxing ring, with you fighting either a punching bag (in a one-player game) or a digital opponent (if two players). A solo game loses a bit in the gameplay department, as your only goal is to punch the bag in time with the commands of your coach. This teaches you the basics of fighting, but without an opponent, it's nothing more than a game of Simon Says. But when another player grabs the other controller, a great game of fisticuffs can break out between two digital boxers. Because of the graphical limitations of the Vectrex, the boxers are nothing more than boxy stick figures, but this does not hamper the gameplay at all.



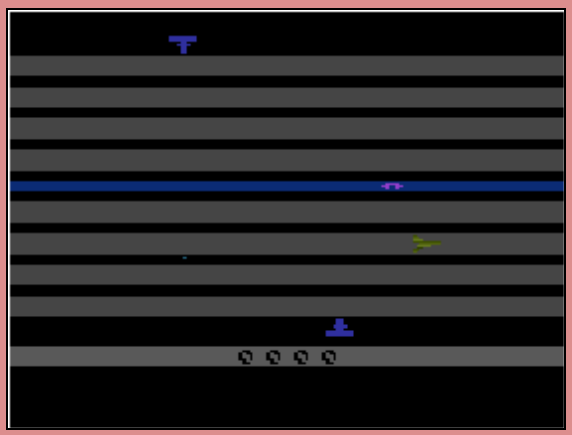
Bejeweled

Programmer: Daniel Bienvenu
System: Colecovision

Based on the popular online game, you are challenged to line up three or more matching jewels by switching the positions of two in the on-screen rack. When a line is made, those jewels disappear and the ones above drop into place. Chain reactions can be formed, as the falling jewels may -- in turn -- line up and disappear, causing more to fall, etc. An onscreen timer makes finding those matches more immediate in this puzzler. Daniel has added another twist not found in the online version: bombs that can be occasionally placed to "blow away" any troublesome gem clusters. Overall, a very true adaptation of a modern classic.

Backfire

Programmer: Chad Lare
System: Atari 2600



Here is a game that challenges you not to shoot *yourself*! You control a gun at both the top and bottom of the screen. Between your two cannons, enemies float by. If you miss with one cannon, you can switch to the other in hopes of hitting your quarry. However, you may miss the targets but end up hitting yourself on the far side! Making the game more challenging are -- later on -- reflecting shields that will bounce your shots back at you. It sounds easy, like target practice in a shooting gallery. But when your aim has to be sharp enough to avoid blasting yourself apart, it adds a whole new level of difficulty to what could've been a standard shooter. A great action game.

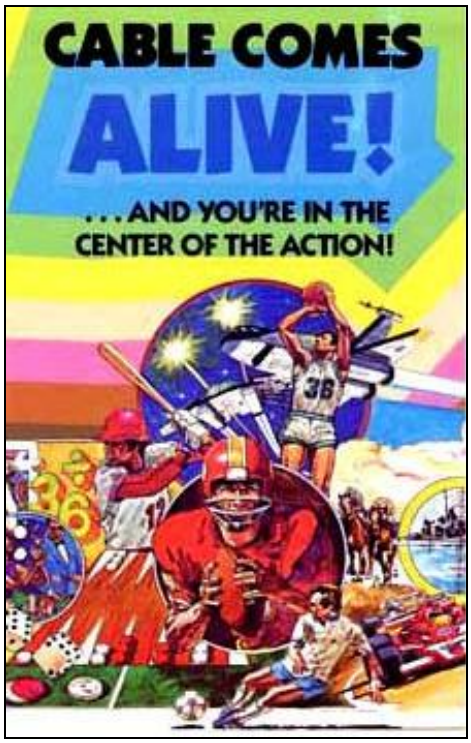
-- Tim Snider

-Memories of PlayCable-

By Michael Roode

It's Christmas season 1981, maybe three weeks before the big day. I'm watching the local cable channel at home with my family, and what we're watching is live coverage of a PlayCable demonstration, being held at the Montgomery Wards shopping center parking lot in beautiful Poughkeepsie, NY — not more than ten minutes from my house. My brother and I watched in fascination as the games being demonstrated were far superior to anything we had on our lowly apf-mp1000 system. We tried to persuade mom to drive us to where the action was so we could see these games in person, and also to learn more about the service that provided them. Being 11 and 12 years old at the time, we had pretty much mastered the art of persuasion, so getting our mother to bring us to the Monkey Wards' parking lot wasn't a problem. I remember four things from that night. One: the games were even better in person. I had little prior knowledge about Intellivision before that night, but once I saw ***Baseball*** I was hooked. Two: the three obnoxious yabbos they got from Boston to "host" the PlayCable-a-thon on TV were even more annoying in person. Three: they were having an ***Astrosmash*** contest where whomever scored the most points in an allotted time would win an Intellivision. Despite my brother's valiant efforts he lost to some bratty punk named Troy. Four: somehow, someway we had to get an Intellivision for Christmas. Of course, that would take a little more persuasion than getting a simple drive, but that Christmas the gods were smiling upon us and we got our Intellivision. Soon afterwards we singed up for PlayCable.

When we first got the package we saw that it came with the PlayCable attachment, which was the same width as the Intellivision, and half the length. It also featured the same design, right down to the 70s-stylin' brown and gold finish. Hooked up, it looked like an Intellivision-and-a-half. Very cool indeed! We also got a small, brown cardboard



box (with PlayCable logos on it) with a compartment that held each instruction booklet for every Mattel produced game released up to that point. However, these weren't standard booklets, as the "setting up to play" consisted of instructions on how to select the game from PlayCable. Also included in the box in its own compartment were two of each overlay as well (these were standard issue overlays — nothing special here). As new games would filter into the PlayCable library, we would receive in the mail a booklet and two overlays for each new game. The overlays were usually perforated and had to be pulled apart.

Setting up the system was simple. It plugged right into the cartridge slot and had a standard RCA jack in the back so when it was hooked up there would be a RCA card coming from both the Intellivision and PlayCable module. They provided a special RF-TV/Game switchbox, which had two jacks: one for "game" (Intellivision unit) and one for "adapter (PlayCable module). It was through this box the games were fed to the unit. The unit also had a separate power cord as well.

When everything was hooked up and the system was turned on, the first thing you would see is the PlayCable title screen, which resembled a standard Intellivision game title screen. There was a steady series of monotone beeps as the game menu information was "loaded." This took about two seconds. When it was ready, the beeps would be longer and the colored rectangles in the upper left side of the screen would turn white one by one with each beep. After two or so long beeps, the menu would be displayed, accompanied by a tune. As I recall, there were one of four tunes that would be randomly selected. One was the "Flight of the Valkyries" theme that is present in both ***Checkers*** and ***Sub-Hunt***. The other three were "Music Box Dancer," "The Entertainer," and some cool ragtime tune that I'm sure has an actual name. The first two songs (besides the "Valkyries" tune) were short renditions that lasted about 45 seconds each, however after "The Entertainer" came to an end there would be a random series of blips that would go on and on. The ragtime tune went on for over three minutes. Luckily, I had the foresight to tape record those tunes off the TV for posterity. I wished I had videotaped the PlayCable stuff as well, but sadly we had no VCR back then. I still have the cassette with the tunes though.

Now the menu displayed its own title screen that said something like "PlayCable Presents" in blue against a black, "spacey" background complete with twinkling "stars." At the bottom of the screen it displayed "Press Disc" in white. Once you did, you

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PlayCable
THE ALL GAME CHANNEL
BRINGS THE FUN
HOME TO YOU!

were given four game selections, numbered 1-4 that were available on that page. If you wanted to play, let's say game #3 on that page, you'd simply press "3" and "Enter." If you didn't see the game you wanted on that page you would then press the disc and be presented with four new selections, and so on until you reached the last page, at which point it would loop, starting with the menu title screen. In the beginning there were 15 games, with two or so being switched every month. By "switched," I mean that two games would be deleted form the menu and then two new games would be added.

When you chose a game, the loading screen for the game would then come on. It looked similar to the opening title screen for the game in question, except it would say "PlayCable Presents" instead of "Mattel Electronics Presents." Accompanying this would be the same steady monotone beeps that were heard when the system was first turned on, only it would take longer to load the game, so you'd get about ten seconds of beeps. Once it was ready, you would hear four long beeps, and the four left rectangles turned white, one by one. Then the actual title screen for the game would pop up, as if you had the cartridge itself plugged in. You would then play the game as usual. To the best of my knowledge, there were no differences in play in any of the PlayCable games as compared to their cartridge cousins. Once you started playing a game, you were stuck with it. The only way to go back to the original menu was to hit the reset button.

Now I had said that originally there were 15 games, with two or so being switched per month. I should mention that the more popular games (such as ***Astrosmash*** and ***Baseball***) were never switched off. Also, it seemed that ***Math Fun*** and ***Word Fun*** were flip-flopped on a monthly basis, so they'd never both be either on or off at the same time. My favorite memory I have of the entire setup (and one of my most fondest childhood memories overall) was pretending I was sick on the first of each month so I could stay home from school to watch the games get switched. At around 8:30 a.m. the games would vanish from the menu. It would still boot up, and there would still be a "PlayCable Presents" menu title screen, but when you pressed the disc nothing happened. Then every couple minutes or so, the games would pop back on the menu two at a time until the entire menu was refilled, albeit with a couple different games. I vividly remember debating with my brother (who would also be mysteriously "ill" that day) over what new games we would get while waiting for the switch to take place, and then being surprised what they'd actually give us! It's nostalgic memories like this that will always put the Intellivision first in my heart when it comes to classic gaming systems.

After six or so months of having PlayCable, our Intellivision gave out on us. Hindsight now tells me it was a common problem with Intellivision systems, but at the time we didn't know that. Of course, my mom playing ***Backgammon*** every night until 4 a.m. didn't help matters (yeah, she got hooked, too). So, for obvious reasons we gave up PlayCable. But it didn't hurt us too bad since it was summertime, and there were plenty of other diversions to keep up busy. However, once fall and winter hit, and there was nothing to do, my brother and me started moaning loudly about getting the Intellivision fixed. It didn't take much to convince my mom since, truth be told, she was missing her nightly ***Backgammon*** excursions as well. So we got the Intellivision repaired, and after that the next step was to re-subscribe to PlayCable. We didn't even know if it was still available as you can't say the Intellivision was ever a truly popular machine (despite the efforts of George Plimpton). And there was zero advertising done to promote PlayCable beyond the initial exposure on the local cable channel that got us hooked in the first place. Luckily, we found that it was still available, so around February 1983 we were back in business. They gave us yet another box full of booklets and overlays (boy, I wish I held onto more 'em!), and as we saw, PlayCable went through a few small changes that didn't go unnoticed. First, there were now 20 games a month to choose from instead of 15. And, as I discovered in the monthly switch, more games were being swapped (about five or so), with two of the games being brand new each time. I can remember getting booklets and overlays for ***Night Stalker*** and ***Reversi*** in the mail on the last day of the month, which clued me in as to what we'd be getting the following day! Also, the song selection during the menu part ad dropped down to only one tune, namely "The Entertainer" (this time without the random blips at the end of the song ended). I guess five extra games a month was a fair trade-off for the three lost songs, but I still missed them nonetheless.

After having PlayCable for about six more months in 1983, we finally got tired of the Intellivision and our mom cancelled the service for the final time. I believe the ColecoVision had something to do with this, since I had received one for my birthday and it became obvious to my mom that we were playing the ColecoVision far more than the Intellivision. Besides, by that time my brother and I had amassed quite a selection of Intellivision cartridges on our own, so having PlayCable was redundant.

Looking back, I can see how the many memories I have associated with PlayCable (I even have a PlayCable shirt that I picked up the first night I saw it in action) have added to the allure and mystique of the Intellivision.

Images courtesy of Intellivision Gumbo (http://members.tripod.com/classic-videogames/intellivision/index.htm). For more information about PlayCable straight from the horses' mouths, visit:: http://www.intellivisionlives.com/bluesky/hardware/

A Hard Habbit to Kick

By Darryl Guenther

Even though time is scarce, I still spend much of my time reflecting back on the days when I longed to tag along with my friends to their parent's bowling tournament. Why, you ask? Because I knew it would mean spending the evening playing my favorite cigarette-burnt video game favorites! Isn't that the highlight of the local bowling alley?

One particular game I was introduced to at the bowling alley is definitely considered an underdog in the classic video game community — ***Kick*** (later renamed ***Kick Man***). The game involves a circus clown riding a unicycle. Similar in play to ***Kaboom!***, this game has a trackball and a HUGE button labeled "KICK." Although the sounds are of classic video game orient, the bells and whistles in the game are of sample quality and the music is whimsical, to say the least. The graphics are at such a fine resolution, one can barely make out the strings that dangle from the balloons.

The game begins with balloons falling randomly from the top of the screen. On the first level, the object is to POP the balloon on the point of your hat and bonus points are earned by kicking the balloon back into the air. However, missing the balloon altogether results in the loss of one turn. After the first level, the game continues as a catch-type game where the object is to catch the balloons on your head. When the stack gets too high, a pause in gameplay allows the rider to pop the balloons one at a time. Having been manufactured by Midway, of ***Pac-Man*** U.S. distribution fame, later levels would include Pac-Men and ghosts. The Pac-Men would eat the balloons for extra bonus points.

Between regular levels, a bonus round takes place involving people throwing balloons and bombs from the balconies of the cityscape. Colliding with a bomb will result in missing your bonus, as would missing a balloon. Following the standard balloon characteristics, the yellow balloons are the slowest, the red medium, and the blue are the fastest, which affects the strategy greatly as the game progresses. Once a balloon is too low to catch, the next best option is to "kick" the balloon back into the air. In the early levels, the balloon can be kicked into the air many times with no other obstacles to interfere. However, during the bonus round, another Bomb or Balloon could be on its way down, so choosing which balloon to catch and which to kick has a lot to do with the comparative speeds of the falling objects. Also, taking care to avoid a bomb plays a great part in this decision.

During later levels, this chaos bleeds over into normal gameplay. If a missed balloon gets kicked back into the air in later levels, another will drop immediately, which results in a game of juggling. This is where the trackball becomes the savior of the game. Luckily, the falling objects are limited to two at a time, and another object will not fall until the second object is caught. Once this technique is perfected, the thrill is in discovering what combination will come next.

Commodore 64 Kick

Kick is my all-time high scoring game, but I can never record my initials since the screen turns to garbage and resets on me. Unfortunately, the "I'm number one," sweatshirt I won a tournament was not as important to my parents as to my whereabouts for the four hours I was late coming home. (It's not as if I could stop to call!)

Other Variations

The only TRUE home version of ***Kick Man*** is the Commodore 64 version, which was programmed and distributed by Commodore, along with ***Omega Race*** and ***Gorf***, to showcase the system's ability to produce arcade-quality games. It's a good thing for Commodore that third party publishers produced games for the 64, because I am not sure the programmer ever played the arcade version. The background resembles the arcade original, and the graphics are good for the time period, however, the gameplay is way off. First off, the levels do not start with the ability to kick the balloons without having to worry about another falling; this is usually something that is reserved for later levels. Even so, there is a limit of two balloon groups. The Commodore version will continuously allow two balloons to be juggled at one time, but due to the sluggish controls, it is impossible to get to balloons on the opposite side of the screen, leaving your character in a losing battle. In fact, many of the details that made the juggling act possible, are gone. For example, falling balloons are able to pass through the balloons that are stacked on your clown's head, which prevents the balloons from being contained to one half of the screen. The Pac-Men are odd to align, and the music is lame and off time, almost sounding like a kid learning to play an instrument without the luxury of a metronome. I spent many years attempting to have an "arcade experience" on the C-64 version, yet as much as I tried to enjoy it, my quest ended in utter disappointment (however, I do give credit to the creative use of the Commodore's graphics).

A Close Resemblance!

A similar game for the Atari ST is ***PinHead***. Although this version is not a true arcade translation, gameplay is closer to ***Kick*** than what's found on the C-64. The Atari version is missing background graphics, bonus levels, and has slightly different music that never varies during gameplay. Despite its shortcomings, I found the Atari game to be enjoyable. It may only be slightly more polished than a program you'd find free in a magazine, but it's fun, and that's what ultimately matters.

MAMEUSEMENTS

By Scott Alan Marriott

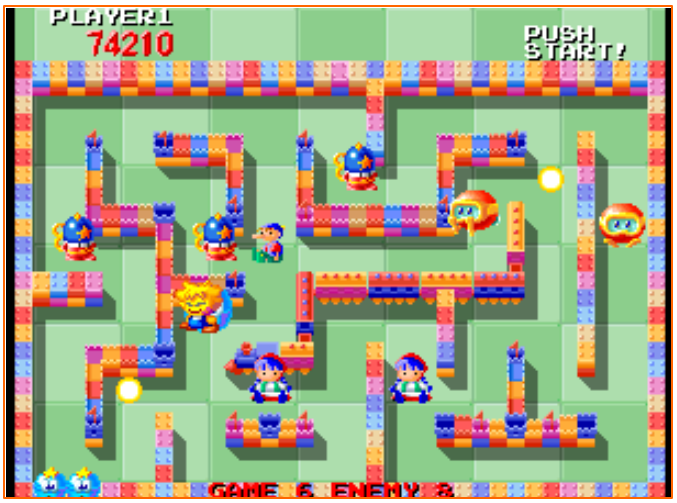
Welcome to the first edition of MAMEusements, where we shine the spotlight on some of the lost, forgotten, or just plain *weird* arcade games released in the U.S. and abroad. These titles may not have the warm recognition of a ***Galaga*** or a ***Donkey Kong***, but they are often just as playable -- that is, if you don't mind something a little off the beaten path. For whatever reason, be it marketing, consumer apathy, poor distribution, or a really dumb title, these gems have gone largely unheralded within the industry. Though the legality and ethical issues surrounding emulation is still a matter of heated debate, one thing is certain: emulation software has kept obscure titles from blinking away into the video game graveyard. A prime example is Namco's ***Tinkle Pit***, released exclusively to Japan in 1993.

While the name "Namco" is as familiar to coin-op fans as the term "lip-synching" is to Britney Spears, the same cannot be said of ***Tinkle Pit***, two words sure to bring a chortle to anyone who appreciates the fine subtlety of bathroom humor. Yes, the name sounds more like the punch line to "where Death Adder dipped the ***Golden Axe***," or perhaps a codeword used for the Atari cartridge landfill, than the title of an arcade game. Yet ***Tinkle Pit*** manages to transcend its regrettable moniker with a perfect mix of lively action, vibrant color, and engaging play mechanics. Those familiar with Namco's earlier ***Dig-Dug*** and ***Pac-Man*** will notice a number of similarities in both spirit and style, but it's the overwhelming sense of cheerfulness that makes ***Tinkle Pit*** so darned fun.

There is a brief story that sets up the action, one involving a bat-like creature and its invasion of a perky planet awash with pastels, oceanic vistas, and even some baked goods. The bat couldn't do it alone, though, so it brought along Pookas and Fygars from ***Dig-Dug***, who were understandably a little sick and tired of mucking around in the dirt and being turned into the equivalent of Macy's Thanksgiving Day Parade floats. Two sprightly toe-headed children, perhaps the game's Tinkle and Pit, agree to rid their world of these cranky castoffs with the help of animated orbs tethered to their hands. Ironically, the tykes are employing slave labor to free their planet, using the orb as an unwilling slingshot (one look at its eyes is all you need to see its fear) to knock any and all pursuing villains lurking within a fixed-screen maze.

The goal of ***Tinkle Pit*** is to clear each stage's monster wave (around 10-15 baddies per screen) as efficiently as possible using one of two techniques. The primary attack, of course, is the tethered orb: players can hold down a button to position the orb before walking away, causing a cord to unfurl behind the lead character. Once an enemy walks onto the cord, players can release the button and give the nasties the heave ho, as the orb snaps back like a dog on a choker chain and topples everything in its path, with bonus points awarded for multiple knocks (like chomping ghosts in the ***Pac-Man*** games). Players can also attack using a move snatched from ***Mr. Do***; each character can pick up and carry a glowing projectile and let it fly at any time, sending it ricocheting off walls like a glob of Flubber.

Though these two attacks are more than sufficient to get the job done, ***Tinkle Pit*** additionally offers several different power-up icons in the center of the maze [*see sidebar*]. These range from ability-enhancing items, such as red sneakers to move faster, to screen-clearing attacks like an avalanche of boulders. There are also eight bonus items located throughout the maze that can be collected for points. Items such as fruit or shells come in two sizes, with the larger items worth the most. It's possible to collect eight large items if players retrieve them in a specific order (touching a large item automatically "supersizes" a nearby small item), and a perfect score is awarded if all eight are snagged before the last enemy disappears (the last enemy runs away and waves "bye" if it's not knocked off in time).



That's basically it on ***Tinkle Pit***, a straightforward maze game that's a smidgen on the easy side. Because the majority of enemies walk or float around the maze instead of aggressively attack, they are rather easy to eliminate or to trick. The mazes themselves are also small, and none of the game's eight themed worlds provide much in the way of new challenges – there are no traps for instance, such as collapsing floors, locked paths, warp pads, and so forth, so levels don't necessarily become more difficult the further you progress. While there are some notable enemies, such as robots who can dodge the orb, quick moving spiders, and armored warriors that take two hits to defeat, players will not have a rough time clearing stages. ***Tinkle Pit*** never stops being fun, though, and there's always the incentive of trying to maximize your score, which requires a keen sense of timing, or sharing the experience with a friend for two-player simultaneous action.

It's easy to understand why ***Tinkle Pit*** was skipped for release in the States even though it's hard to imagine anyone hating the game. The one-two combination of an easy difficulty setting and a game that *ends* is always a bad thing when the goal of a coin-op title is to steal away as many quarters as possible from willing players. The throwback graphics at a time when 3D games like ***Cyber Sled*** were wowing audiences surely didn't help, and the simple two-button controls weren't nearly as sophisticated as other games on the market. None of this really matters, though, because you now have a chance to Tinkle in the privacy of your own home. Honestly, it had to be said. Tune in next issue when we look at ***Penguin Kun-Wars***, which is not nearly as obscene as it sounds. MAME time, MAME column.

TINKLE PIT POWER-UPS

Speeds Up Orb	Extra Life
Speeds Up Character	Creates an Avalanche
Electrifies Enemies on Path	Falling Ice Cubes!
Turns Enemies into Pac-Man Ghosts	Power Projectile

SUPER PAC-MAN ITS A BIRD! ITS A PLANE! ITS A PROTOTYPE!

Date of Release: Prototype	Developer: Atari, Inc.	Publisher: Atari, Inc.	Designer: David Crane

When Atari's house of cards folded, as every one else's did around 1984, many titles were left unreleased for both the VCS and the 5200. Some of these, such as the 2600 version of ***Tempest*** shown at CGE 2000, are no big loss. But others, it has since been discovered, are actually a lot of fun. And it's that latter category into which ***Super Pac-Man*** for the 5200 falls.

Kicking off with a more-elaborate-than-usual title/skill select screen, ***Super Pac-Man*** is a near-perfect recreation of the arcade game. Even the controls are responsive and quick, though every once in a while the curse of the non-centering joystick sends me careening down the wrong passageway of the maze to my monster-induced doom.

If there's a hitch to this unreleased gem, it's the fact that your "super" powers last only a fraction of the time they do in the arcade version. When you eat the large green power pellets, you have -- at best -- a mere few seconds in which to use the benefits (such as breaking through the doors and using super speed). Other than that, it's flawless. It's hard to imagine a great arcade translation like this one vanishing into coulda-been obscurity, and considering the seemingly finished state of this game – I've gotten *well* past the first intermission -- it's hard to believe that ***Super Pac-Man*** couldn't have been released as a fan club exclusive, rather like 2600 ***Crazy Climber***.

by Earl Green

Super Pac-Man for the Atari 5200 can be purchased at the Atari Age store. Go to www.atariage.com for more details.

Music Review: Namco Classic Collection

Techno Maniax – Namco Classics Collection (1998)

This somewhat bizarre, and entirely official, Japanese release proves that there's more videogame music waiting to be made out there -- and the classics are ripe for a fresh sound.

With a mere eight tracks clocking in at three quarters of an hour, *Namco Classics Collection* puts a techno twist on the sound effects and music of some of the biggest hits to have come from the video game powerhouse that is Namco. Prominent in this collection, as can be judged from the cover, is Pac-Man, with Yoshihiro Sawasaki making a humorous mix out of sound samples from the game, as well as sped-up-into-Chipmunks-territory vocal samples and a beat which moves along at a cartoony, breakneck pace. (Sawasaki gives a similar treatment to a *Mappy* mix on this CD as well.) But by a vast margin, the best tune on here is *Galaga: Tiny Voice Production Remix,* an eight-minute epic which layers sounds from *Galaga* over a breakbeat and somehow manages to have an almost hypnotically relaxing effect. And if the song isn't enough of a pop-culture collision for you, it even features the "greeting tune" from the movie ***Close Encounters Of The Third Kind***. Spielberg and *Galaga*? Now there's a connection I'd never made in my head before.

Sadly, not every tune on here fares as well; Akakage remixes ***Mappy*** and ***Galaga*** into two completely different, and almost completely-unrelated-to-their-inspiration, remixes. There are few samples, and barely even any hint of the original tunes that peppered these two games. *Xevious: Maximum Power Of Triple Z80 Remix* is slightly less guilty of barely offering even a trace of the game sounds that inspired the mix.

Though *Namco Classics Collection* isn't exactly hard to find, it's costly for those in the U.S., as it's an import item. Those wanting more for their money than 45 minutes of music spread over eight tracks -- not all of them necessarily worth hearing -- may want to question whether they really want to spring for it. Perhaps it should have been offered as a send-in-your-proof-of-purchase premium with the re-release of the *Namco Museum* games on the Playstation, N64 and Dreamcast.

-Earl Green

Letsa go!

Mario is back in 2D, but Nintendo had nothing to do with it. Find out how "Mario Adventure" is reinvigorating the Italian plumber.

By Skyler Miller

It's been twelve long years since Nintendo released a 2D platformer featuring Mario as the star. (Trivia alert: That honor goes to ***Super Mario Land 2: 6 Golden Coins*** for the Game Boy.) And frankly, it doesn't look like we're going to see a new one anytime soon.

Officially, that is. Thanks to the hard work and creativity of Travis Houk, Mario is back on the NES in a big way. While most so-called "hacks" of NES games merely add a few new sprites or change some text, Houk's reprogramming of ***Super Mario Bros. 3*** has yielded ***Mario Adventure***, a full-fledged game with brand new levels, power-ups and enemies, as well as other inspired features such as variable weather and a day/night system.

Inspired years ago by the debug mode of ***Sonic the Hedgehog 2*** and recently frustrated by what he calls the "shoddy" remakes of Mario games on the Game Boy Advance, Houk (aka Dahrkdaiz) took matters into his own hands to create a brand new Mario game.

"I decided to include the best aspects of Mario games like exploration from ***Super Mario 64***, non-linearity [from **Super Mario 3**] … and add new ones, such as the weather system to keep the game fresh. All this, I must admit, was to appease my own appetite for a new Mario 'Adventure,' which is where the title comes from," he says.

The game, which is available as an IPS patch at www.dahrkdaiz.panicus.org, boasts eight brand new worlds, a save system, and innovative power ups like the "invisible cap" and "magic wand."

But Houk, whose favorite all-time system is the Sega Genesis, especially likes how the game can be different every time you play it.

"There's just so much to do rather than going from point A to point B," he says. "You can revisit levels to find the many hidden secrets, or collect coins to get items to the more difficult levels. There's a lot of flexibility in the path you take in the game."

That path may include visiting the icy Lakitu Glacier, the fiery Hot Foot Caverns, or the innovative Colossal Classics, a revisiting of some of the best levels of the original ***Super Mario Bros.***, only bigger. Considering the size and scope of the game, it's not surprising that the project took 14 months to complete from start to finish.

> **"The magnitude of praise this game has received has completely shocked me."**

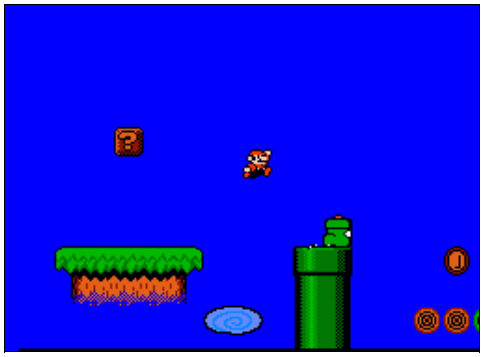
"You need patience," Houk says. "I see many people attempting this kind of project and ending it very quickly. I did this project for my own joy, which happens to be shared with other people's interest. If you don't have fun doing it, it won't turn out very well."

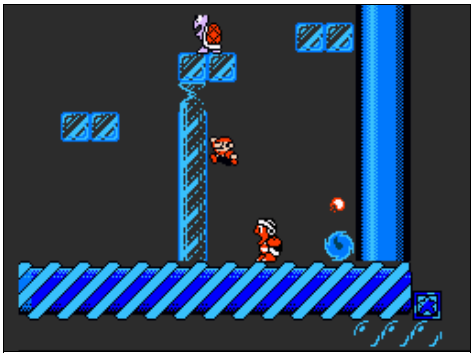
The most difficult part of creating the game, according to Houk, was designing the levels. "I had to go back and change many levels over and over to get things just right," he says. "Not to mention, each time I added a new feature, I would have to go back to previous levels and accommodate the new changes."

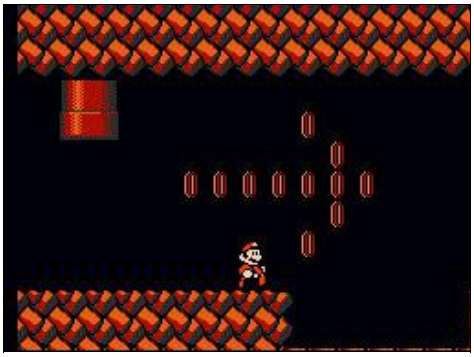
But all of that hard work seems to be paying off. Reaction to ***Mario Adventure*** has been overwhelmingly positive. "The magnitude of praise this game has received has completely shocked me," Houk says. "I've had people ask me to accept donations as thanks for completing the game, but I politely decline. I do it all for the love of video games."

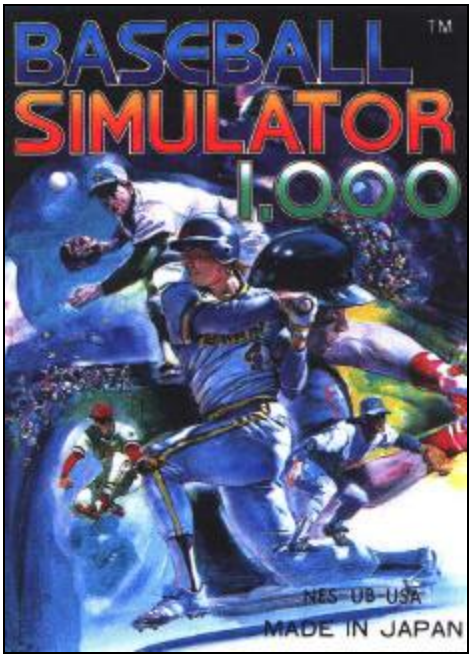
Houk is currently a full-time student studying Computer Science, and hopes to get a job in the video game industry after graduation. As for future projects, he is currently working on a mod of ***Mega Man 3*** with parallax scrolling, and is considering working on ***Castlevania II*** and ***Kid Icarus***.

As NES fans eagerly await his next release, Nintendo could stand to learn a thing or two from Houk's DIY creation. If the powers-that-be ever decide to create another 2D Mario quest, they certainly would be wise to check out ***Mario Adventure*** for ideas.









Classic Sports Report:
Baseball Simulator 1.000

By Scott Alan Marriott

With Opening Day just around the corner (along with the rich smells of roasted peanuts and grilled hot dogs), what could be more appropriate than a look back at a classic baseball game? This issue's *Sports Report*, CGM's new column, examines Culture ***Brain's Baseball Simulator 1.000***, a title released 14 years ago this very same month. While baseball games can be found on nearly every console system and handheld (by Jove, even the Microvision has a basic rendition of our national pastime), few have offered a more interesting mix of games than the NES.

Modern platforms can now deliver unrivaled visuals, realism, and depth, but you'd be hard pressed to find a more diverse, inspired, and enjoyable lineup than on the 8-bit workhorse. From robotic competitors in ***BaseWars*** to ***Bases Loaded 3***'s innovative fielding to the robust management options in ***Baseball Stars***, the NES is practically overflowing with memorable titles. And ***Baseball Simulator 1.000*** might be the quirkiest of the bunch, featuring an "ultra power" system that temporarily imbues athletes with near superhero qualities.

These ultra powers can be used in all three phases of the game -- batting, pitching, and fielding -- as players try to get that key strikeout, double play, or clutch hit. Not all ultra powers are successful, however, and part of the strategy is deciding the most appropriate time to use them. Each ultra power costs a team points, and once the points are gone, it's goodbye meteor hit and hello routine grounder. Fielding powers, such as rocket jumps and hyper throws, cost five points per use, while pitching and batting powers cost three points apiece.

The powers are often hilarious, especially when playing against a friend, with 10 different techniques available on the mound and at the plate. Pitchers may be able to scorch the ball at speeds well over 100 miles per hour (the photon ball), while batters can trigger a screen-shaking earthquake the moment the ball kisses the ground (the devastating tremor hit). The animation brings these powers to life, with lightning strikes hitting the mound, baseballs exploding into fire, batters literally twisting themselves into a corkscrew, and more. The only thing missing is an ACME anvil dropping from the sky.

The strategic zaniness of the ultra plays is worth the ticket price alone, but ***Baseball Simulator*** further distinguishes itself by allowing players to form their own six-team league, modify each athlete's attributes, and save the whole kit and caboodle to battery backup. Statistics are also tracked throughout a customizable season, games can be simulated, and players can set rotations, change lineups, and even shift outfielders. Alas, player names are limited to a pitiful four characters, and some will lament the omissions of a salary cap and ability to trade as in games like Baseball ***Stars***.

Though ***Baseball Simulator*** was chronologically the fifth baseball game released on the NES, its visuals are not a drastic improvement over the system's first (1985's ***MLB Baseball***). Fielders are roughly the size of gophers, and all are in desperate need of tanning sessions. The batter-pitcher interface is nowhere near as eye-popping as the earlier ***Bases Loaded***, instead offering a perspective slightly above and behind the batter. Yet small touches like a pitcher sweating bullets when he's fatigued, fireworks after home runs, and six themed stadiums help you forgive some of the shortcomings.

The in-game action also helps make up for any deficiencies in the presentation. ***Baseball Simulator*** features an unusually solid mix of line drives, grounders, and fly balls -- all at different speeds and heights. While fielders bounce throws near the bag instead of firing clean strikes, you can still turn two if your timing is sharp. There's also some roster depth, with players able to pinch hit, pinch run, or bring in a reliever (with different throwing styles). Swings have just the right amount of weight behind them, pitches move well, and base running is a snap. It's refreshing to go back to a game where the controls are intuitive instead of confusing.

Fielding uses the same scheme as other Japanese baseball games of the era, which means you control a group of fielders at once instead of each one individually. While this is limiting, there is a degree of skill involved with catching fly balls (do you push up to make the first baseman catch it, or push down so the right fielder has a chance?). Since multiple fielders move simultaneously in one direction, an incorrect guess could spell disaster. Skilled players will be able to judge a ball's distance by listening to its sound effect and carefully watching the shadow, backing up just enough so the fielder raises his stubby arms to signal a catch.

Baseball Simulator 1.000 is notable for two reasons: the ultra aspects and the ability to edit and save stats, both of which elevate the game to near classic status for its time. Too often sports games are undervalued by collectors who perceive later is always better than earlier, which is their loss and your gain. ***Baseball Simulator 1.000*** is as fun today as it was in 1990, and an excellent start for a burgeoning NES sports collection. The fact it can be had for a song makes it that much sweeter.

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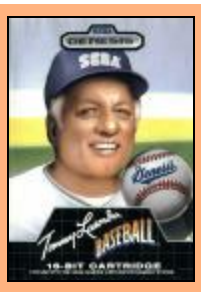
The Genesis Cover Curse!

By Scott Alan Marriott

Few industries are as superstitious as professional sports, where stories of athletes wearing the same undergarments during a win streak, eating the same food before every game, or even talking to their equipment after making a play are as commonplace as hostile takeovers and corporate mergers in the business world. Players are either in the zone or battling a slump, victim of a sophomore jinx or another casualty of the *Sports Illustrated* cover curse. It's enough to give anyone the heebie-jeebies.

Perhaps this paranoia stems from a deep-rooted belief that too much fame or recognition is a bad thing, but the idea of a cover "curse" may not be exclusive to books or magazines. CNN of all places suggested evidence of a blight on recent Madden games, presenting Michael Vick's preseason mishap after appearing on ***Madden NFL 2004*** as exhibit A. Are the sports gods frowning upon our adulation? Is it all just a coincidence? *CGM* decided to delve a little further back to see if such a curse exists on the Genesis.

It's no secret that Sega, desperately trying to carve out a name for its new system, believed celebrity endorsements would help them do what Nintendidn't. Instant recognition of a celebrity combined with the company's popular arcade hits would prove crucial to the acceptance of a public leery of new systems after 1983's disaster. Thus early Sega titles featured prominent endorsements, the majority of which happened to be sports titles. After all, Mike Tyson helped move copies of ***Punch-Out!!*** on the NES, right? Join us as we switch Fox Mulder's flashlight on ten celebrity-based Sega covers to see if there's any truth to this alleged "curse."

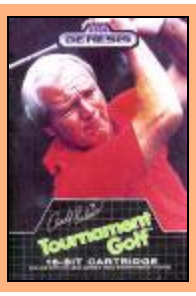


Tommy Lasorda Baseball (1989)

***Cover Credentials*:** Led his team to a World Series victory in 1988.
***After Cover*:** Tommy suffered a heart attack in 1996, which contributed to him stepping down as manager of the Los Angeles Dodgers and beginning a well-publicized Slim-Fast regimen. The horror!
***Years Until Curse*:** Seven.
Curse Rating: **

Pat Riley Basketball (1990)

***Cover Credentials*:** Trademarked the term "three-peat" in 1988; led L.A. Lakers to 1989's NBA Championship; named 1990's Coach of the Year.
***After Cover*:** Pat leaves the L.A. Lakers in 1991 and later resigns from coaching in 1993 after two straight losing seasons with the Miami Heat. He vows to never coach again, much to the chagrin of hair gel companies everywhere.
***Years Until Curse*:** Three.
Curse Rating: **

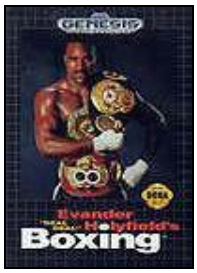


Arnold Palmer Tournament Golf (1989)

***Cover Credentials*:** Named "Golfer of Decade" by *Golf Magazine*.
***After Cover*:** One of golf's most enduring heroes had successful prostate cancer surgery in 1997, but his wife lost the battle with cancer in 1999.
***Years Until Curse*:** Eight.
Curse Rating: ***

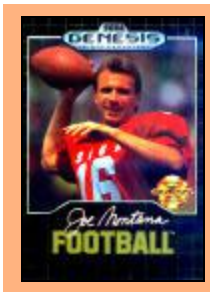
Michael Jackson's Moonwalker (1990)

Cover Credentials: Album "Bad" released in 1988; autobiography published in 1989; music videos "Smooth Criminal" and "Moonwalker" inspiration for Sega arcade and Genesis games.
***After Cover*:** First accused of child abuse in 1993; chimp pal Bubbles sent packing after smacking Michael in the face; becomes increasingly weirder by the month.
***Years Until Curse*:** Three.
Curse Rating: ***



Evander Holyfield's "Real Deal" Boxing (1992)

***Cover Credentials*:** Became World Heavyweight Champion in 1990 after defeating Buster Douglas in three rounds.
After Cover*:** Lost to Riddick "Big Daddy" Bowe in 1992, regained title and lost it again to Michael Moorer in 1994. In a 1997 match against Mike Tyson, had part of his ear bitten off, which supposedly tastes like chicken. After Real Deal, Sega gives up on featuring one boxer on the cover and opts instead for a group of past and present-day champions in the follow-up, ***Greatest Heavyweights.
***Years Until Curse*:** Zero.
Curse Rating: ***



Joe Montana Football (1990)

***Cover Credentials*:** Led San Francisco 49ers to Super Bowl victories in 1989 and 1990.
***After Cover*:** Injures elbow in training camp the following year, causing him to miss the entire 1991 season and most of 1992. Traded to Kansas City Chiefs to finish career. Would appear on a record five covers on the Genesis before passing the ball to Deion Sanders. Say it ain't so, Joe!
***Years Until Curse*:** One.
Curse Rating: ***

Ayrton Senna's Super Monaco GP II (1992)

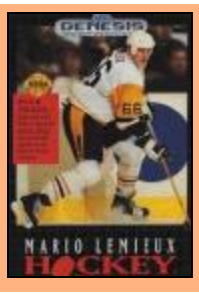
***Cover Credentials*:** Won the prestigious Formula One championship in 1998, 1990, and 1991.
***After Cover*:** Dies from a crash while competing in 1994's San Marino Grand Prix.
***Years Until Curse*:** Two.
Curse Rating: ***

James "Buster" Douglas Boxing (1990)

***Cover Credentials*:** Defeated the formerly indestructible Mike Tyson in a boxing title match held in Japan on February 11, 1990.
***After Cover*:** Surprisingly (or not surprisingly, if you're a boxing fan), Buster Douglas lost his World Heavyweight title before the year ended to Evander Holyfield. He would never be heard from again.
***Years Until Curse*:** Zero.
Curse Rating: **

David Robinson's Supreme Court (1992)

***Cover Credentials*:** Dubbed "The Admiral" from his U.S. Naval Academy years, David earned Rookie of the Year honors in 1989-90.
***After Cover*:** David had a back injury before the 1996-97 season, and then fractured his left foot soon after returning to action. He played in only six games for the season.
***Years Until Curse*:** Four
Curse Rating: *



Mario Lemieux Hockey (1991)

***Cover Credentials*:** MVP in 1988; NHL's scoring leader for 1989 and 1990
***After Cover*:** Mario is diagnosed with Hodgkin's Disease in 1993 and misses 62 games while receiving medical treatments. Also missed the entire 1994-95 season from fatigue.
***Years Until Curse*:** Two.
Curse Rating: ***

KID CHAMELEON

Date of Release: December, 1992	*Developer:* Sega Technical Institute	*Publisher:* Sega of America

This ***Super Mario Bros.***-inspired platformer is distinguished by its zany assortment of power-ups that transform the title character into a knight, rhino, alien, samurai, and more. On the surface, ***Kid Chameleon*** is classic Mario: from bopping blocks to butt bouncing on enemies to locating flagpoles that end levels. Yet the worlds are anything but derivative. Kid is trapped inside a video game, giving developers carte blanche to concoct as many surreal locations as possible -- over 100 levels worth. While the goal is simply to find an exit, it's a task easier said than done with the added pressure of a time limit. Levels are crammed with obstacles, alternate routes, and power-ups, so players must quickly decide which transformations are most beneficial. Changing into a fly enables Kid to cling to surfaces and squeeze through crevices, while another power-up lets him whirl in the air (and over obstacles) for short periods of time. The designers obviously had a twisted sense of humor when creating the game, with certain exits sending players *back* levels, viable routes leading to dead ends, and some of the strangest enemies ever witnessed on the Genesis. Though it's easy at first glance to dismiss the title as a mere knockoff, a closer look reveals Chameleon's true colors: quality gameplay.

- Scott Alan Marriott

Rating:

BATMAN RETURNS

Date of Release: February 1993	*Developer:* Konami Co., Ltd.	*Publisher:* Konami of America, Inc.

Beat-'em-ups are a hit-and-miss genre, both literally and figuratively, and the track record of movie licenses is, shall we say, less than perfect. ***Batman Returns*** manages to combine the best of both worlds, resulting in one of the most enjoyable games of its type on Super NES. The wizards at Konami addressed the genre's biggest problem -- repetitiveness -- by including a diverse selection of moves, a variety of levels (including a Batmobile stage), and beautifully detailed graphics that mirror Tim Burton's dark and moody film. The huge characters are a plus, and a wide mix of circus-from-hell enemies will harass Batman's front and back. Players in a pinch can throw items from the utility belt, latch onto ceilings with the bat grapple, and perform special moves seen in film, such as grabbing thugs on either side and knocking their heads together. Nice touches include drifting snowflakes, raging fires, and the cathartic ability to throw clowns into background walls or windows, though expect many of the boss fights to wear the fingerprints clean off your thumbs. Despite its maddening difficulty level at times, the game's high production values and slick moves will have you clinging to your controller tighter than whip-cracking Catwoman's leather body suit. Meow!

- Scott Alan Marriott

Rating:

New Life for the NEO GEO

Despite being released 14 years ago, the Neo Geo is still alive and kicking. With a thriving fan community snapping up every new release, the past few months have seen four high-profile games that will keep Neo Geo devotees' wallets empty for months to come.

Clocking in at 708 Mbits, ***Metal Slug 5*** continues the series' familiar blend of action and humor. Unlike ***Metal Slug 4,*** which most aficionados saw as a step backwards, the fifth entry actually features all-new levels, enemies and new vehicles, as well as the addition of a slide move.

SvC Chaos: SNK vs. Capcom once again offers gamers the chance to pit their favorite SNK brawlers against the best Capcom has to offer. This one is also expected to arrive on the Xbox and PS2 later in 2004.

Samurai Shodown 5 (aka ***Samurai Spirits Zero***) offers up 24 total characters, with four new ones, as well as some minor tweaks to the gameplay.

Although the year in its title is a bit behind the times, **King of Fighters 2003** is the latest installment in the famous fighting tournament featuring the likes of Terry Bogard, King, Goro Daimon, and Maxima. Additions include the ability to change team members during matches and select a leader for your team.

Look for more in-depth reviews of these games in future issues of *CGM.*

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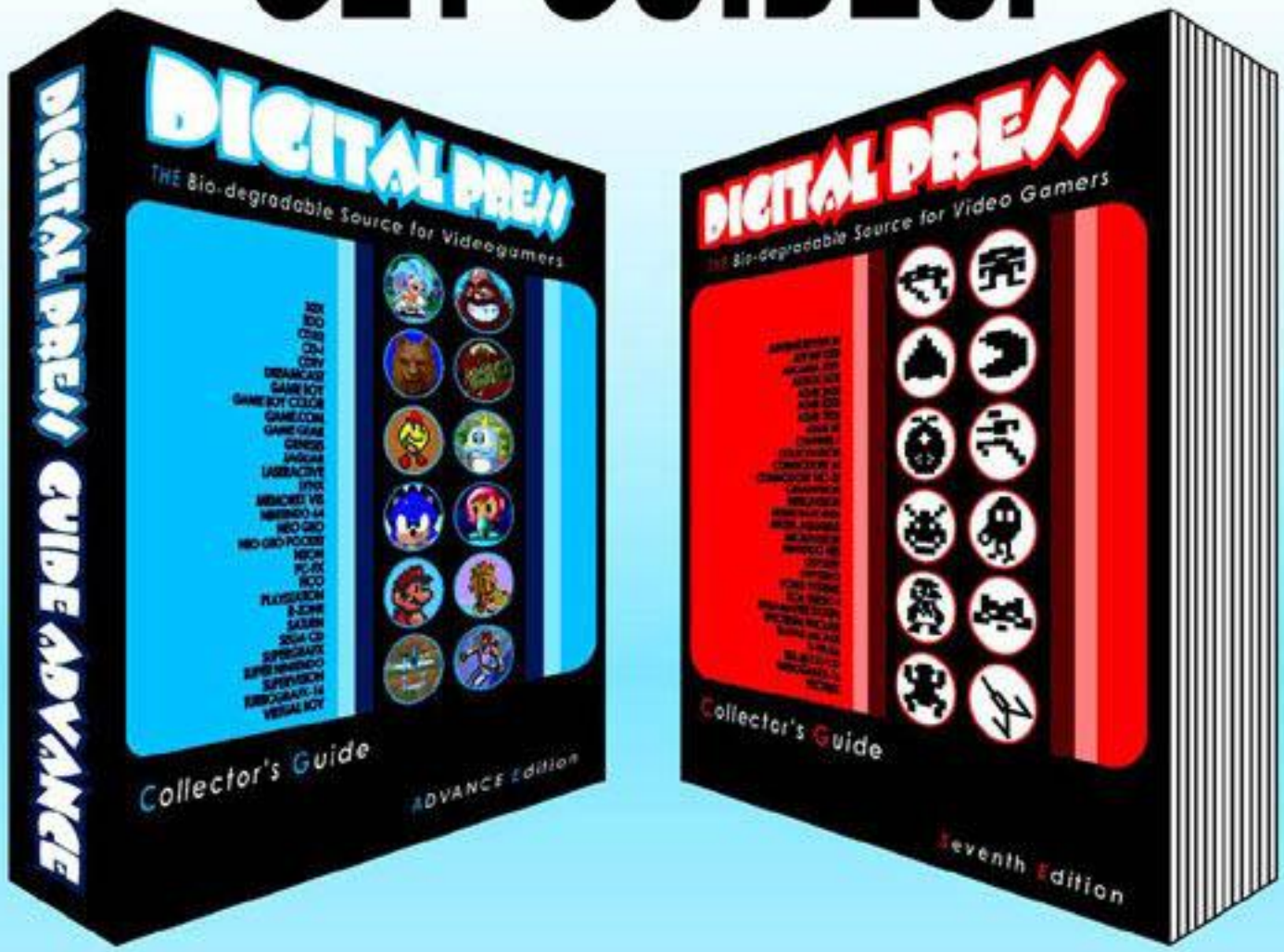

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Ten Lessons of the PlayStation

By Scott Alan Marriott

Sony's 32-bit PlayStation is one of the most impressive success stories in the industry. Considered by many analysts as a dark horse compared to the bankable names of Sega and Nintendo, Sony captured the world's attention on September 9, 1995 and never let go, helping to forever change the way systems are marketed, sold, and played. In a sense, Sony accomplished what Nintendo did ten years prior with the NES, cutting itself the biggest piece of market share pie while letting the other companies fight over leftovers. The result? Sega has since thrown in the towel as a hardware publisher, Nintendo has looked absolutely clueless at times, and the newest kid on the block, Microsoft, still has a lot to learn. So without further ado, the top ten lessons learned from the PlayStation, in no particular order, are as follows:

1. You don't need a pack-in game to sell a system. A time-honored tradition of including a great pack-in game (okay, let's for a moment forget about the TurboGrafx-16's launch title) was snapped as PlayStations flew off shelves without any killer app. Instead of a full game, players instead received a demo disc of upcoming and current releases, enticing owners to go back to the stores and purchase their favorites, maybe even grabbing a second controller or memory card while they were there. Angry about shelling out big bucks for ***Super Mario 64*** or ***Halo***? Thank the PlayStation!

2. Mascots, schmascots. It wasn't for lack of trying (remember the disembodied purple-headed polygonal

"spokesman?"), but Sony didn't have anything close to a mascot game until ***Crash Bandicoot*** whirled its way onto the gray box in 1996 -- and it wasn't even a Sony property! Ditto for ***Spyro the Dragon***. Still, this apparent identity crisis didn't damage sales in the slightest. As Mario would say, "Mama Mia!"

3. Goodbye 2D, hello 3D. Perhaps the biggest slap in the face to classic gamers was the cataclysmic shift from one genre staple to another. Make no mistake, the sights and sounds of ***Ridge Racer*** and ***Battle Arena Toshinden*** wowed audiences (the games were even featured in 1995 movie theater previews), but there wasn't time for a proper 2D sendoff. Instead of shaking their fists at challenging gameplay, players would be shaking their fists at an obstructive camera. Sadly, the overwhelming emphasis on 3D meant Sega had to quickly change its tune, taking away one of the few things the Saturn excelled at.

4. Cartridges are old news. The CD generation did not begin with the PlayStation (as anyone who dropped stacks of green on a TG-16 CD will tell you), but it certainly proved it was the right format (and if you listen quietly, you can still hear the echoes of Nintendo execs stamping their feet in disgust). Wise moves included making the switch from long boxes (seen on the Sega CD and Saturn) to jewel cases, and realizing right from the start that demos, interviews, and codes could be packed onto sampler discs for promotional purposes. The JAMPACK series, subscription-based PlayStation Underground CDs, and later Official PlayStation Magazine discs took the proven concept of computer demos and brought it to the console market.

5. Strong third-party development is a key to success. Look at any failed console or handheld system in the last 30 years and you'll likely find a dearth of third-party support. Hell, that was practically Atari's business model during its waning years, at least for the criminally neglected Lynx and Jaguar. Yet Sony actually proved a slick first-party development team wasn't absolutely necessary, much to Sega and Nintendo's chagrin, when you have properties like ***Tomb Raider***, ***Final Fantasy VII***, and the undying love of a little company named Electronic Arts.

6. Two analog sticks are better than one. Sony proved it could adapt to a dynamic marketplace by replacing the PlayStation's original digital controller with the Dual Analog Stick and later Dual Shock. Nintendo's N64 controller proved analog was here to stay, as was vibration feedback, but Sony decided to double your pleasure, double your fun, which made just about every supported game better, especially racing titles.

7. Sports sells. Sega understood this, Nintendo didn't (and maybe never will). Sony's PlayStation has more sports games than any other system before it, and part of the reason was the infusion

of more casual gamers to its fold. Electronic Arts, Konami, Midway, THQ, and Sony's own 989 Sports helped keep fans happy throughout the PlayStation's long life. Of course, Sony screwed up its best-selling sports franchises when it moved to PlayStation 2, but that's a topic for another time.

8. Role-playing games are a must. There's only so many fighting games or racers the public can stomach before wanting to hurl. RPGs drive the hardcore audience -- and this hardcore market tends to spend early and often during a product's life cycle. Though the system started off a little shaky in the genre, fans were eventually fed a steady diet of many different types of role-playing games (strategy-oriented, action, turn-based, etc.) from a number of quality publishers. The overwhelming success of Square's ***Final Fantasy VII*** opened up the floodgates.

9. It's in the cards. One of the weaknesses of a CD-ROM based system is its inability to write to the disc to save progress or other information. Sony had a solution with its portable, wafer thin memory cards. Not only did they save games, but they fit easily in a pocket, allowing players to take their characters, souped-up vehicles, or stats to a friend's house. Plus, you could download codes, saves, or cheats from other discs for use with existing games. Initial memory cards only had 15 blocks of storage space, but gradually increased as years progressed.

10. More greatest hits than Elvis. While both Sega and Nintendo offered players discounted versions of some best-selling titles in the 16-bit era, respectively under the "Mega Hit" and "Player's Choice" labels, these did not include third-party releases and were typically released late in the platform's life. Sony in 1997 wisely encouraged publishers to participate in its "Greatest Hits" lineup of PlayStation games, creating a buzz and also reducing the MSRP to an attractive $19.99 apiece. Eligibility requirements for titles under this new product line were sales of 250,000 copies or more.

Puyo Fever!

The Dreamcast died a premature death in the U.S. in early 2002, but the system has continued to receive limited support in Japan. The latest such release is ***Puyo Puyo Fever*** a special treat courtesy of Sonic Team, released on February 24, 2004. Sticking with the familiar gameplay of the classic puzzle series, the game includes a story mode, two-player competition, and a new "fever meter" that allows players to unleash a series of devastating combos on their opponents. The game is playable on U.S. Dreamcasts equipped with a mod-chip or by using software such as "DC-X." For non Dreamcast loyalists still interested in some Puyo action, the game is slated for a June U.S. release on both the GameCube and Xbox as ***Puyo Pop Fever***.

The Mystery of Qix Neo: SOLVED!

By Skyler Miller

As one of what may be the last US PlayStation releases, ***Qix Neo*** is representative of many recent budget titles for the system. And by that we mean it's cheap and poorly designed. But at $7.99, you get what you pay for, and since it's ostensibly based on ***Qix***, we thought it was worth a second look.

Far from being a "neo" version of ***Qix***, the game is strictly retro, with basic visuals and a soundtrack that literally sounds like an alarm going off. The difficulty level is also set extremely high. Even the "arrange" mode, which the manual says offers "improved graphics," only upgrades things from 1989 to about 1993. Perplexed by some of its dissimilarities to ***Qix***, its late '80s look, and the knowledge that the game would not have been developed strictly for an American audience, we decided to dig deeper into ***Qix Neo's*** past.

It turns out that researching its convoluted background was quite a bit more entertaining than the game itself. Some investigation revealed that it's not based on ***Qix*** at all, but instead a 1989 ***Qix***-inspired arcade game by Taito called ***Volfied***. It was ported to the Genesis as ***Ultimate Qix*** in 1991, and this PlayStation version originated in 2001 as a Japanese budget port called ***Simple 1500 Series Vol. 80: The Jintori***. In case you're wondering, the word *jintori* translates from Japanese as a "children's game in which the aim is to occupy the other's home base." We have no idea how that relates to the game, but the intro screen does refer to a planet called "Jintori."

So, nothing earth-shattering was discovered, but for curious minds like ours, it was interesting to trace the game's origins, especially when it was one that received zero coverage elsewhere. As for whether ***Qix Neo*** is worth checking out, it's a pretty hard sell even for under ten bucks. But if you've waited all these years for a home version of ***Volfied***, you're certainly in luck.

Turok: Dinosaur Hunter

Rating:

Largely responsible for Acclaim's resurgence to respectability after years of licensed dreck, ***Turok: Dinosaur Hunter*** is an anachronistic first-person shooter inspired by Valiant's heady comic book series. Players guide an Indian chief named Tal'Set moments after he finds himself trapped in an alternate dimension populated by robotically enhanced dinosaurs. In other words, your typical, run of the mill story line. An intriguing control setup finally offered console players what computer owners had been used to since ***Wolfenstein 3D***, but it was the smooth animation and rich, ambient sound that made ***Turok*** stand out during the time of its release. Though the jungle setting is a definite plus, the world is enshrouded in thick, hazy fog (a technique that would dog the system for years), causing players to routinely ask themselves, "Didn't I just pass this same green bush ten minutes ago?" Some intensely violent action sequences are nearly canceled out by the humdrum need to find keys, pull switches, or to locate save points. Yet the most frustrating aspect is being forced to leap across platforms while handicapped by the viewpoint. Though the ambitious series would evolve into one of the best multiplayer experiences outside of ***GoldenEye*** and ***Perfect Dark***, this initial effort is more primitive than polished.

Star Wars: Shadows of the Empire

Rating:

The first Star Wars game for N64 is an uneven mix of genres, the most dominant being third-person shooting stages from behind the back of Han Solo-wannabe Dash Rendar. The first level recreates the battle of Hoth sequence with thrilling results, as players pilot a snowspeeder around AT-AT walkers to trip them up with tow cables, but the rest of the game moves at about the pace of Darth Vader's breath -- slow and labored. Sparsely populated levels with dimwitted enemies form the bulk of missions, and players will spend more time jumping across chasms than blasting foes. Not even the headline duo of bounty hunters Boba Fett and IG-88 (as bosses) can overcome the sheer tedium of gameplay. Instead of focusing on one specific genre and sticking to it, the game unfortunately becomes a Padawan of all trades, Jedi Master of none.

Blast Corps

Rating:

British developer Rare's ode to obliteration offers everything would-be demolitionists could hope for, from Godzilla-sized robots to dump trucks, bulldozers, rocket cycles, and more as they smash, crash, and bash buildings to create a path for a rogue missile carrier armed with a nuclear payload. As part of a futuristic demolitions squad, players must ensure the perpetually moving carrier passes through cities unscathed. The catch? There are *a lot* of obstacles standing in the way, and the varied terrain often requires ditching one vehicle for another. More than an action game, ***Blast Corps*** features clever environmental puzzles requiring players to continually think ahead. All buildings are completely destructible, and the harrowing sense of doom echoes such early classics as ***Missile Command***. Equally aggressive and thoughtful players will be challenged throughout, especially when forced to use the tricky backlash vehicle, which does its damage only while moving in reverse. Some frustrating time constraints and a lack of two-player support are dings on an otherwise superlative game that never got its due. Critics who lambaste Rare for unoriginal design need look no further than ***Blast Corps*** for the explosive rebuttal.

Superman

Rating:

Somewhere in the far-flung reaches of space, a little alien is enjoying an incredible game of Bizzaro. Here on Earth, we suffer through ***Superman***, an adaptation of the Kids' WB animated series, which is as diabolical in design as any of Lex Luthor's experiments. Instead of flying through a 3D Metropolis teeming with people, players are thrown into a "virtual" realm filled with the densest fog ever witnessed in a N64 game. Players travel at speeds closer to a sloth than a speeding bullet, with sloppy, unresponsive controls that turn a simple process of jumping or grabbing into an aggravating ordeal. Though you'll never leap buildings in a single bound, you *will* get to fly through a series of hoops made unbearably difficult by the controls and ridiculous time limits. Powers like heat-vision and freeze breath (once "found") are pointless when you're punching robots, slamming into walls while trying to fly, and searching for keys to open doors apparently too strong for your super-muscles. It's a shame players couldn't use x-ray vision on the attractive box art, for they would have seen inside a game that's as fun to play as the movie *Superman III* is to watch.

Final Fanta.... >sigh<

By Scott Alan Marriott

Have you ever walked into a movie theater with high expectations for a particular film, only to find them dashed within minutes of it starting? That's what happens soon after switching on ***Final Fantasy: Crystal Chronicles***, a spin-off of Square's flagship role-playing series and former Nintendo mainstay before it moogled over to PlayStation. Though tensions between Nintendo and Square have been laid to rest after years of verbal potshots, ***Crystal Chronicles*** is still not the auspicious debut many may have hoped for.

Rather than adopt a turn-based or active time battle system found in previous titles, Square opted for an action role-playing game in the same vein as The ***Legend of Zelda***, ***Secret of Mana***, and to a lesser degree, ***Diablo***. While the genre has seen a great resurgence thanks to hits like ***Gauntlet: Dark Legacy***, ***Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance***, and ***Dungeons & Dragon's Heroes,*** the ability to step into the beautiful and meticulously detailed Final Fantasy universe is what sets ***Crystal* Chronicles** apart from the competition.

True to its recent heritage, ***Chronicles*** never disappoints the eyes (the heart, however, is another story). Fans will notice the same distinctive artwork style used in ***Final Fantasy Tactics***, with characters possessing a somewhat unsettling mix of child-like features and mature bodies. The villages are flat-out gorgeous, each brought to life with a myriad of subtle touches: plumes of smoke billow from chimneys perched upon densely thatched roofs; tranquil streams and lakes ripple softly in the breeze; townsfolk and livestock bustle about their daily routines; and roughly hewn cobblestone paths lead the way to shops and cottages. Players will even board a massive ship that raises and lowers its sails in preparation for a voyage across the river.

Yet the game's most touted feature is its ability for up to four players to participate simultaneously -- that is, as long as everyone involved has his or her Game Boy Advance and corresponding GCN-GBA cable. Solo adventurers are free to play with the standard controller, but the color handheld is a mandatory requirement for two or more dungeon delvers. Why, other than to pad Nintendo's bottom line, is the GBA used as a primary controller? That's the million-dollar question. The party line is that it frees the television from the clutter of menus, pause screens, and other distractions expected in an RPG. Furthermore, each person is assigned a custom display screen in the developer's effort to inspire teamwork: one person will see a map on the GBA, while another has a radar of nearby treasures, monster locations, and/or boss statistics.

Like so many other Japanese role-playing games, ***Crystal Chronicles*** features an environmentally conscious story line, this time involving a deadly gas named Miasma and a group of Myrrh trees holding the key to its removal. (*CGM is all for saving the environment, which is why we aren't harming a single sapling for your reading enjoyment. Hey, we're good that way.)* Though it is a world where only caravans dare venture out into the countryside, there's surprisingly little exploration or discovery. ***Crystal Chronicles*** is another linear RPG in which players are given a modicum of choice where to visit next, but not in what they will ultimately encounter along the way. That is the biggest disappointment of ***Crystal Chronicles***: its limitations.

At the game's start, players select from a pre-defined list of four different tribes, each varying in strength, defense, magic, and health, as well as one of eight familial "trades," but there's almost no character customization or tinkering outside of acquiring specific types of equipment. After creating their character, players depart their home village and head out into the great wide open (more like the great narrow path) as part of a "caravan." Navigation takes place from an overhead view of an outdoor map, with the caravan able to move in one of four directions. Traveling from one area to the next consists of pointing the caravan toward a locale, pressing a button, and watching as the wagon keeps rollin', rollin', rollin' toward its destination.

So the fun of ***Crystal Chronicles*** lies not in the journey itself, but rather in the objective, which is straightforward hack-and-slash combat against a bevy of well-animated beasties. Each dungeon features a few switches, twisting paths, and treasure chests, with players ultimately facing off against a large boss character that guards one of the trees. The viewpoint throughout is fixed from an overhead perspective, which means no herky-jerky camera, but the action isn't very exciting. Sadly, the repetitiveness of combat is more apparent in this title than in any of its sword-swinging peers because there's nothing to divert your attention -- no traps, randomly generated items, brain-teasing puzzles, or special techniques to perform.

The biggest problem? The lack of moves used to fight enemies. Instead of quickly deflecting blows, somersaulting away, and jumping high into the air, players simply tap a button to attack (or hold it for a charge attack), and then repeat. Things really slow down when magic or defensive moves are involved, as the game forces players to choose one or the other. The poorly designed system utilizes the shoulder buttons to scroll through three different states: attack, magic, and defend. Why not press one button to defend with the weapon, press another to cast spells, and so forth? No doubt the developers made these silly concessions to account for the GBA's button limitations. Wasn't the handheld supposed to "free up" the action rather than hinder it?

While players in combat can perform combo attacks by casting magic, the number of spells pale in comparison to most other role-playing games. First off, characters are all "magic free" before going into each and every dungeon, so spells must be collected after defeating enemies (each spell is encased within a large color-coded orb). There are only six orbs in total, consisting of blizzard, thunder, fire, life, clear, and cure. Casting involves holding down a button and aiming a cursor over the desired target, with players able to switch equipped spells using the shoulder buttons. More powerful hybrids can be chained together if each player quickly times his or her spell so it hits the same target in a specific order (a system not unlike the color-matching game *Simon*).

You're probably wondering how the action unfolds with four players: What happens if someone wanders off? Will the screen split into four separate viewpoints? In a more interesting game, it would have. In this title, however, the developers created a storyline to explain a questionable design feature. Since the world is filled

with a poisonous gas, players are forced to cling together like a handful of Gummi Bears on a hot summer day. As long as a crystal chalice is near them at all times, players will be free from the effects of the noxious gas. The problem is in the relatively short "safety zone" or protective barrier created by the crystal chalice, which discourages individual exploration by keeping everyone on a short leash.

In a single-player game, a moogle will pick the chalice up (a rather large object) and slowly follow the main character, creating a ring of safety as it moves. If the character runs too far away from the chalice, however, he or she will start taking damage. The damned moogle also has a tendency to get tired, meaning you have to relieve him of his duties and haul the bloody thing yourself from time to time. In multiplayer, characters can take turns moving the chalice or draw straws and have one poor sap responsible for carrying it. How fun is *that*? Again, the developers simply wanted everyone to stick together, but having to constantly pick up and drop a chalice just to move a few feet is ridiculous.

There are many other questionable features. Players must periodically change the chalice's protective crystal in order to pass certain areas on the overworld map, which has characters ditching the wagon and running through a tunnel for no other reason than to watch pretty swirling lights in the distant background. There are also a number of lame, scripted encounters on the map screen, where fellow travelers suddenly interrupt your caravan's path just so the developers could create some semblance of a story. More irritating is the inability to walk into the wonderfully detailed buildings populating the villages, and the short length of the dungeons, which offer almost zero interaction outside of slaying monsters.

With all the hoopla surrounding Square's triumphant return to a Nintendo console, is it unreasonable to expect something at least as good as a ***Baldur's Gate: Dark Alliance***, or even the original ***The Legend of Zelda***? Instead everything in this game seems forced, especially the teamwork: forced by having someone carry a chalice, forced by displaying different GBA screens, and forced by making the most powerful spell variants a tag-team effort. Perhaps it's also a distinct possibility the developers were forced by Nintendo to use the Game Boy Advance in the first place, a system that's an unqualified success, as a bridge to a system in desperate need of some attention.

Rating:

PAC-MAN VS.

Date of Release: December 3, 2003	Developer: Namco Hometek, Inc.	Publisher: Namco Hometek, Inc.

It's a dream match-up: Shigeru Miyamoto and ***Pac-Man***. The master behind Mario and Zelda has put his magic touch on one of the arcade classics, and the result? ***Pac-Man vs.*** What Miyamoto has done here is taken an idea most of us have had at one time or another -- "Wouldn't it be cool if you could control the ghosts in ***Pac-Man***?" -- and used it to show off the connectivity possibilities between the GameCube and Game Boy Advance.

Here's how it works: The player controlling Pac-Man does so on the GBA screen in a traditional 2D rendition of the game, while other players control the ghosts on the television. Each ghost only has a limited view of the maze, represented by spotlights, but eating fruit expands the view. If a ghost touches Pac-Man, they get to become Pac-Man, and must be handed the GBA. The result is a lot of swapping controllers. Ghosts that are not controlled by human players are grayed out until they are touched by a player. They are then able to catch Pac. The first player to earn a predetermined amount of points is the winner.

It may all sound a bit complicated in writing, but the underlying concept is simple, and since just about everyone knows how to play ***Pac-Man***, the learning curve is short. Unfortunately, there are a couple of barriers to actually playing the game. First of all, you need a lot of equipment: a GameCube, a Game Boy Advance, a GBA-to-GCN link cable, the game itself, and up to three controllers. Then you need the players themselves. ***Pac-Man vs.*** is strictly multiplayer-only, so loners are out of luck.

The visuals are decidedly basic but get the job done. The GameCube graphics are reminiscent of the pseudo-3D, isometric ***Pac-Mania*** that hit arcades in 1987, albeit more polished. The GBA graphics are strictly old-school, sporting the traditional 1980 look. The memorable theme song and sound effects are also old friends. There is one surprising exception, though. Despite not appearing visually in the game, Mario is on hand to deliver painfully obvious commentary like "Pac-Man ate a power pellet!" Such comments are comically out of place, but do add some laughs.

In the end, ***Pac-Man vs.*** is a fun party upgrade to the arcade classic as well as an interesting technical demonstration. At a time when Sony and Microsoft are touting the online capabilities of their consoles, it's a little silly for Nintendo to be so proud of being able to connect their console to a portable, but that sort of charming obsolescence is precisely the thing that will endear ***Pac-Man vs.*** to classic gamers. If you already have both a GameCube and a GBA, it's definitely worth checking out, even if you have to shell out the dough for a link cable.

- Skyler Miller

Rating:

Pac-Man vs. is available in special two-packs with *Pac-Man World 2*, and *R: Racing*, and was available with the purchase of *I-Ninja*. You can also find stand-alone copies on eBay.

Super Monkey Ball 2

Date of Release: August 28, 2002	Developer: Amusement Vision	Publisher: Sega of America, Inc.

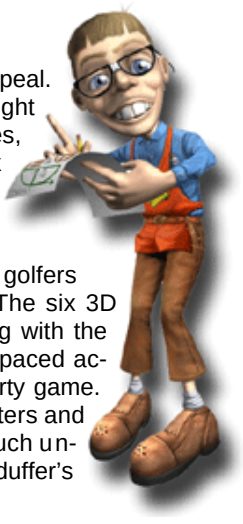
It's a rare feat for a video game to satisfy in terms of both involved, extended gameplay while also offering a quick distraction when need be – but Nintendo GameCube's release of ***Super Monkey Ball 2*** seems to fit both bills by offering a fun and challenging story mode in addition to some quality mini-games. Of course those familiar with the original ***Monkey Ball*** concept will be more than pleased with the traditional "Story Mode" aspect of the game -- with imaginative graphics and challenging levels offering an undeniably fun and involving time. Fluid and intuitive controls add to the simplistic charm of "Story Mode," and if the increasingly complex levels test your patience from time to time once can always opt to kick back and relax with one of the many party games. A highlight of the original ***Monkey Ball*** for many, those who enjoyed the original mini-games will certainly be happy to roll their monkey balls through such highly addictive challenges as "Monkey Target," "Monkey Race" and "Monkey Dogfight." "Monkey Billiards" offers better control and gameplay than many stand alone billiards simulators, and though "Monkey Golf" offers a slightly more complex control scheme than its previous incarnation it's still a blast to tee-off once you get a feel for the slight changes. With a handful of levels readily available and even more that become accessible as players progress through the game, **Super Monkey Ball 2** maintains a high replay factor while successfully luring players with the promise of even more fun to come. While some of these mini-games require considerable skill and patience to begin with (trying to get your monkey to the bull's eye in "Monkey Target" can be quite exhausting at first), once the levels are mastered they offer a fun and relaxing, Zen-type gaming experience.

Rating:

— Jason Buchanan

HOT SHOTS GOLF 3

Date of Release: March 13, 2002	Developer: Clap Hanz	Publisher: SCEA, Inc.



Known as ***Everybody's Golf*** in Japan, ***Hot Shots Golf*** is the rare sports franchise to have proven crossover appeal. Too often golf games appear stuffy and humorless, so concerned with capturing every nuance they risk losing sight of the most important element: fun. This is never an issue in ***Hot Shots Golf 3***, the first PS2 entry in the series, with its big-headed characters and even bigger laughs. Part of the appeal is its accessibility, where anyone can pick up a controller and master the swing mechanics by the first hole. Rather than bombard players with cumbersome menus, the interface is kept clean and simple: a horizontal meter marked with helpful percentages is all that's needed to set distance, power, and accuracy. Though serious players may be turned off by the whimsical approach (counterfeit courses, absurd animations, corny caddies), the game has depth. A variety of incentives, from additional golfers and scenery elements to new equipment and bonus features, are waiting to be unlocked through skilled play. The six 3D courses also differ wildly in appearance and will even change along with the seasons. Stat tracking is robust, ball physics are solid, and the fast-paced action averages about a minute per hole, making for an excellent party game. While it would've been nice if there were individual editors for characters and courses or a few additional modes, ***Hot Shots Golf 3*** is filled with such unbridled enthusiasm you can't help but be sucked in by its charms. A duffer's delight.

Rating:

— Scott Alan Marriott

Midway's Greatest Arcade Hits

Date of Release: November 22, 2001	Developer: Pocket Studios	Publisher: Midway Home Entertainment

Old-school gamers who fondly remember pumping quarters into free standing arcade monoliths while defending the universe from hordes of invading aliens will find a large dose of nostalgia and a miniscule sting of disappointment when playing ***Midway's Greatest Arcade Hits*** on the Game Boy Advance. Including the well-loved classics ***Robotron***, ***Defender***, ***Sinistar*** and ***Joust***, each game is a perfect reproduction of its original arcade counterpart. Enjoying a round of Joust or patrolling the skies of ***Defender*** will without doubt have gamers reflecting fondly on days when, even if their feet were sore and their knees bowing from standing hours on end, they still ran for the nearest change machine the minute "Game Over" flashed before their eyes. The only problem whatsoever with this winning collection of games is not the fault of Midway, but of the Game Boy Advance itself. Though generally enjoyable, the sometimes challenging controls combined with the often hard-to-see screen can make for the pretty frustrating gaming. For the most part ***Defender*** and ***Joust*** offer no problems in this respect, it's when attempting to play ***Robotron*** and ***Sinistar*** that problems arise. Lack of the original joystick controls make both games difficult to maneuver, and the tiny bombs needed to defeat the Sinistar are difficult to see on the small screen and nearly impossible to acquire. Even with these sometimes frustrating factors taken into consideration, each game is a near perfect reproduction in terms of sound and graphics.

-- Jason Buchanan

Rating:

WARIO WARE, INC.

Date of Release: May 22, 2003	Developer: Nintendo Co, LTD.	Publisher: Nintendo of America, Inc.

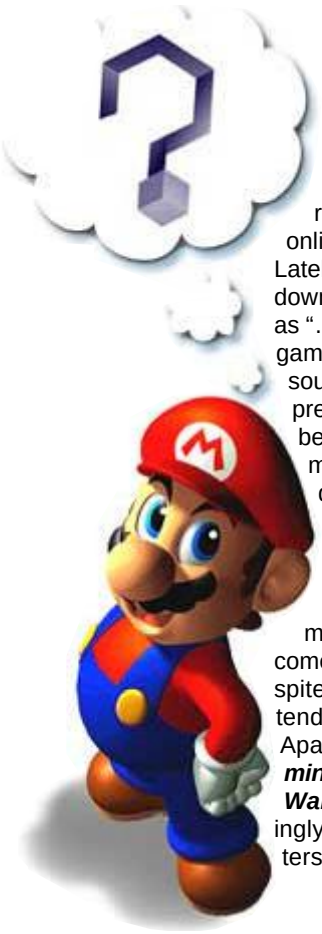
WarioWare, Inc. is a mini-game compilation like no other, both wonderfully original and terribly addictive at the same time. Players must survive a scintillating series of fast-paced "microgames" designed by Wario and his colorful cronies. The 200+ games packed onto the cartridge have been stripped down to the barest of essentials, each spanning a mere four seconds of action, with activities ranging from shaking a collie's paw to sinking a basket. The challenge comes from the uncertainty of what's coming next and the speed in which you need to react. Winning is a test for even the most agile of gamers, since repeated activities offer subtle changes in speed or layout to keep the pressure on. Games are divided into themes, from classic NES variants to sports shorts, with top scores and win streaks saved to battery backup. What makes ***WarioWare*** so special is the content -- completely off-the-wall and totally uncharacteristic of a Nintendo game. From rapidly tapping a button to sniff up dripping phlegm (!) to quickly slicing through a juicy steak, you won't believe your eyes (or ears). Mario might be the host with the most, but he's no longer the life of the party.

— Scott Alan Marriott

Rating:

Nintendo: Gameplay Over Glitz?

By Skyler Miller



Ever since the GameCube was announced, Nintendo has made a big deal about putting the focus squarely on games rather than additional functions such as online access and playing DVD movies. Lately, the big 'N' has gone even further down this rhetorical road, with quotes such as "… customers are not interested in grand games with higher-quality graphics and sound and epic stories," (former Nintendo president Hiroshi Yamauchi) and "I do not believe releasing a higher performance machine is the solution," (current president Satoru Iwata).

Most readers of a publication titled *Classic Gamer Magazine* would agree that quotes like these are a welcome change of pace from the often single-minded focus on technology that usually comes at the expense of gameplay. But despite all of the recent talk, what has Nintendo really delivered in the past few years? Apart from a few offbeat games like ***Pikmin***, ***Animal Crossing***, ***Pac-Man vs***. and ***Wario Ware,*** Nintendo has been increasingly reliant on sequels, franchise characters and re-releases of older games, just like the rest of the industry. Will the recently announced Nintendo DS, a two-screen portable, be the system that finally delivers on their promises, or is the recent chatter just spin to cover up the fact that Nintendo really is lagging behind in the technology race?

There is also the possibility that these statements are being misinterpreted (and/or mistranslated) by a gaming public hungry to paint Nintendo as out of step. It's doubtful Yamauchi and Iwata mean to insinuate that technology doesn't matter; just that technical specs cannot substitute for unique gameplay experiences. One does not necessarily exclude the other. Nintendo is also wise to recognize that there's an audience for mere "games" instead of increasingly complex "interactive experiences." Reaching this demographic is perhaps what Nintendo is striving for.

Though it's commendable for Yamauchi and Iwata to put game design first, at least in principle, most mainstream gamers do in fact respond to flashy graphics and hype. So, it's one thing for Nintendo to make quality games that focus on gameplay rather than glitz; for them to believe the majority will buy them is another thing entirely. Maybe the only way Nintendo can survive in this fickle business is to differentiate themselves from the competition, but will they find a profitable niche selling what may be seen by some as a less advanced line of products? Until they start delivering the games to back up their claims, all of this talk is just that — talk.

Play Like an Egyptian.....

By Scott Alan Marriott

Date of Release: November 20, 2003	*Developer:* Digital Eclipse Software, Inc.	*Publisher:* Midway Home Entertainment

Classic games are in vogue, the soup du jour of an idea-starved industry. Seemingly every publisher is looking at ways of repackaging, repurposing, and reshuffling its past hits in order to rekindle, recapture, or in some cases, reinvent a market. Activision has already taken multiple cracks at its Atari 2600 lineup, Namco refuses to let ***Pac-Man*** go gently into the night, and Nintendo has opened up the vaults for "new" titles on Game Boy Advance. And updated versions of ***Ninja Gaiden***, ***Rygar***, ***Prince of Persia***, ***Shinobi***, ***Contra***, and ***Castlevania*** are already fighting shelf space at electronics stores around the country.

While it's encouraging that companies realize classic titles should not be held under lock and key, many previous compilations and updates have been lacking. Is there a reason why Nintendo shouldn't release its entire 8-bit lineup on a single disc? Why Namco has been ever so reluctant to give us *everything* instead of doling out a handful of games title by title? Even Midway's last attempt at a retro package was a paltry six games divided into two volumes. Yet it appears the tide is changing. Modern remakes (such as ***Metroid Prime*** and ***Ninja Gaiden***) are now including the originals as bonus features, and classic compilations are growing larger and larger by the year.

Arcade Treasures is the largest arcade collection released to date. Rather than repeat what it did for the Dreamcast, PlayStation, or N64, Midway decided to do it right this time. Bolstered by the coin-op libraries of Williams Entertainment and Atari Games, ***Arcade Treasures*** offers a robust 24 titles for a pittance of $20. And there's something to be said about playing these (mostly) classics while lounging on the family room sofa in front of a large television screen instead of from behind the warm glow of a PC monitor. It's a more social experience, which is part of an arcade's lure to begin with.

Included in this anthology is a nice mix of genres released between 1980-1990. From the Atari Games lineup are ***Gauntlet***, ***Paperboy***, ***RoadBlasters***, ***720°***, ***Rampart***, ***KLAX***, ***Super Sprint***, ***Vindicators***, and ***Marble Madness***. Williams' library consists of ***Joust***, ***Joust 2***, ***Defender***, ***Stargate***, ***Sinistar***, ***Blaster***, ***Robotron 2084***, ***Bubbles***, and ***SPLAT***. Midway offers the fewest titles of the three, but all are popular hits: ***Rampage***, ***Smash TV***, ***Satan's Hollow***, ***Root Beer Tapper***, ***Toobin'***, and ***Spy Hunter***. Each title can also be tweaked in the areas of control, sound (mono or stereo), and gameplay, from the number of lives and overall difficulty to the score needed for bonus lives and more.

DIGITAL ECLIPSE'S EMULATION FOR EACH TITLE IS EXCELLENT, AND OWNERS OF PREVIOUS COMPILATIONS ON THE ORIGINAL PLAYSTATION WILL NOTICE A SIGNIFICANT IMPROVEMENT IN FRAME RATE AS WELL AS IN VISUALS...

Digital Eclipse's emulation for each title is excellent, and owners of previous compilations on the original PlayStation will notice a significant improvement in frame rate as well as in visuals for games like ***Defender*** (no more glitches when moving up or down). The resolution for many of the titles may not be as crisp on a television screen as on a computer monitor, but the controls for the most part are great. Players can choose either digital or analog input, with the latter making games like ***Robotron 2084***, ***Smash TV***, and ***Sinistar*** an absolute blast to twitch through again.

The multitap peripheral is supported for ***Gauntlet***, ***Rampage***, ***Rampart*** (a must-play!), and ***Super Sprint***. Players aren't able to use a USB mouse for the trackball games, but the analog control is adequate once you get used to it. ***Marble Madness*** takes the most practice, but you'll learn to adjust after a few games. While the overall selection in ***Arcade Treasures*** is certainly great, there are still a few questionable absences. ***Moon Patrol*** was originally supposed to be included but was later dropped due to licensing issues. Also curiously missing are ***Gauntlet II***, ***A.P.B.***, ***Xybots***, ***S.T.U.N. Runner***, ***Hard Drivin'*** and a few other notables, which would have made the collection more complete. Rare games from Williams such as ***Inferno***, ***Speed Ball***, and ***Mystic Marathon*** would have been nice additions as well.

Yet the most disappointing aspect of ***Arcade Treasures*** is the interface used to select games, with the inconsistent bonus content running a close second. In keeping with the "treasure" motif, the developers created an Egyptian-like front end that's more confusing than practical. Players are presented with a bizarre group of hieroglyphic symbols representing each game. Deciphering them involves highlighting each one until a faded title screen (with an irritating warping ef-

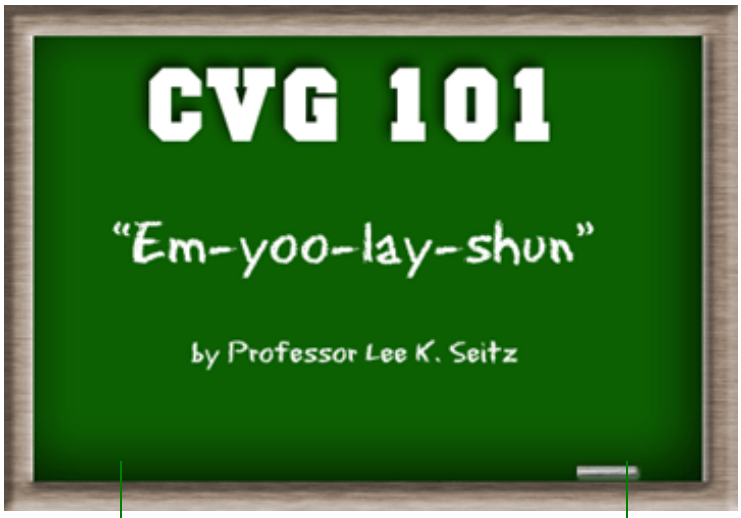
fect) appears in the center of the "tomb." Once the appropriate game is highlighted, players can press a button to start the game, change options, or view the game's history, each of which involves a loading sequence. Players must sift through multiple screens when everything should have been accessed in one.

The history section is also awkwardly designed, requiring players to use the shoulder buttons to navigate between interviews, trivia, galleries, and history, even though most categories are blank. What few interviews are included have a grainy, sub-VHS quality and are mysteriously chopped into several short segments. The content is often interesting, however, if the presentation isn't. Players will learn of designer Eugene Jarvis' shock that people actually got past wave five in ***Defender***, his disappointment more people didn't take to its sequel, why ***KLAX*** doesn't have any music, and more. A number of arcade flyers and cabinet pictures are also included, which can be magnified, but the dearth of information, trivia, and game histories on such huge titles is puzzling to say the least.

It's a shame the overall package isn't up to the quality of the games buried within. Instead of goofy symbols, players should have been presented with a list of arcade marquees, with everything clickable from a single screen: a flyer for artwork, a movie reel for interviews, and so forth. And why not have a scoring profile for each game, with such details as the number of times played, number of credits used to reach a high score, and so forth? The current system is confusing, clumsy, and sloppy, where even the fonts look amateurish. ***Arcade Treasures*** offers a near perfect selection of hit arcade titles packaged in an unappealing manner. Considering the attractive price and quality of the emulated games, ***Arcade Treasures*** is a worthy addition to anyone's library, yet those hoping for a pot of gold will have to settle instead for pieces of great.

Rating:

Game	Interviews	Trivia	Gallery	History
720°	X		X	
Blaster		X	X	
Bubbles			X	X
Defender	X		X	X
Defender II	X		X	X
Gauntlet		X	X	
Joust	X		X	X
Joust 2	X	X	X	X
KLAX	X			
Marble Madness		X	X	
Paperboy			X	
Rampage	X			
Rampart	X			
RoadBlasters		X	X	
Robotron 2084	X		X	X
Root Beer Tapper		X	X	
Satan's Hollow			X	
Sinistar	X		X	X
Smash TV	X			
SPLAT!		X	X	
Spy Hunter		X	X	
Super Sprint	X			
Toobin'	X			
Vindicators			X	



If you're a classic gamer and are on the Internet, odds are you've at least heard of emulation and emulators. You may even have a hard drive full of ROMs and a computer desktop full of emulator icons at home. If that's the case, you might as well go read this issue's *MAMEusements* by Scott Marriott. If you're the one saying, "what's a ROM?" (Yes, *you*! The one in the back!), keep reading.

An emulator is simply a program that lets one computer imitate a different computer. When I say "computer," I mean it in almost the most generic sense. In this case, an electronic device that uses microprocessors to, er, compute. For example, there are emulators that let your Apple Macintosh act like a PC, your PC pretend it's a Sony PlayStation, and your PlayStation think it's an Intellivision. (And for some real fun, try running the Intellivision emulator on your PlayStation emulator on your PC emulator on your Mac.) Sounds simple enough, right? "So," you ask, "how do they work?" I wish you hadn't asked that.

Creating an emulator is not a simple task. It takes a lot of technical know-how and programming skills. It's really more complicated that I can explain in this limited space, but let's see if I can cover the basics. Since this is *Classic Gamer Magazine*, we'll limit our discussion to home video game consoles and coin-operated arcade video games. For all video games, there are four primary areas to consider: video, audio, controls, and central processing unit(s). These are collectively known as the hardware.

The CPU emulation is really the heart of an emulator. It's the CPU that runs the program that is the game, whether the game is contained in a chip on a cartridge (as in home consoles) or on several chips soldered to a printed circuit board (PCB) (as in arcade games). In order for an emulator to run a game, you have to make your computer processor run as if it were the console's or coin-op's CPU.

In addition to the CPU, there are probably other processors that handle the video, audio, and controls. When the emulator programmer creates these components, he must not only have them imitate the original hardware, but translate their input or output to the emulator's host system. For example, you can't hook up your Atari 2600 directly to your PC monitor. They simply aren't compatible. Similarly, your sound card isn't a TV speaker and there's nowhere to plug in the joystick. So the emulator has to convert what was once a TV (or arcade monitor) signal into something your video and sound cards can understand. Likewise, it has to convert certain presses of the keyboard into something that appears to the emulated CPU like pressing the joystick and buttons. So, to reiterate, an emulator is a computer program that imitates the hardware of another computer. Now, when it comes to computers, where there's hardware, software usually isn't too far behind. In the case of video games, it's the game itself that is the software. When you plug a cartridge into your ColecoVision, you're actually connecting a Read Only Memory (ROM) chip to the CPU. When you turn the console on, the CPU then executes (runs) the code found in the ROM chip (or just ROM for short). Similarly, when you turn on an arcade game, the CPU reads the software in the ROM chips connected to it.

Now, most people don't have the hardware to connect a cartridge to their computer. This is where ROM images (or, again, just ROMs for short) come in. It is possible to buy or even make the proper cables and/or hardware to connect a cartridge or arcade game ROM chip to a computer. Then you can use special software to copy the software contained in the ROM to a file on your computer. This file is called a ROM image. The ROM image (or, say it with me, ROM for short) is identical to the code that the console or arcade game runs. Thus, when used in conjunction with a good emulator, you can get an experience that's almost just like playing the actual console or arcade game.

You might be wondering why it has taken so long for emulation to become as popular as it is today. The primary reason is that computer processors have only recently gotten fast enough to handle emulating other systems. There's a lot of overhead in getting one computer processor to emulate another. It wasn't until the mid-1990s that personal computers had the power to emulate a 1MHz CPU! And then programming an emulator generally required using assembly language. Assembly language is a very low-level language for directly programming a computer. It's basically only a couple steps removed from the actual zeroes and ones your computer uses. The advantage is, because you're practically talking the language of the computer, programs written in assembly are (generally) very fast. But because it's so rudimentary, few people take the time to learn it. Thus, there were few people that had both the interest and the ability to write emulators.

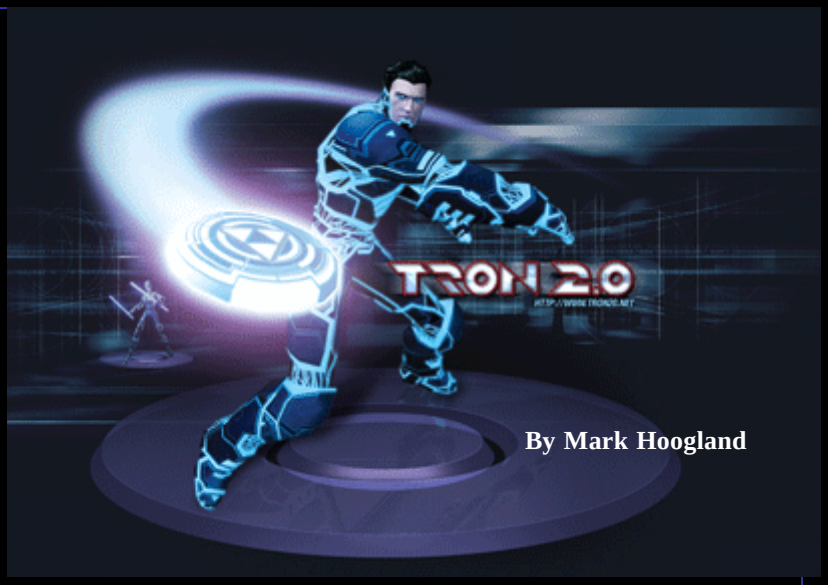
By the late 1990s, computers were powerful enough to handle emulators written in higher-level languages like C. A program written in a language like C is converted down to assembly language by what's called a compiler. But even the best compiler isn't going to create an assembly language program as efficient as that written by hand. (At least that written by the hand of an experienced assembly language programmer.) Thus, such programs run slower. This has been made up for in processor speed.

To give some early history, Digital Eclipse released their Williams Digital Arcade series for the Macintosh in 1994. The games of the series were ***Defender***, ***Joust***, and ***Robotron: 2084***. These were the world's first commercially released arcade game emulators. The following year, Activision published their first Atari 2600 Action Pack, which was an Atari 2600 emulator accompanied by 15 games. This was the first commercially released home video game console emulator. These two programs, along with several independent efforts that happened to be taking place about the same time, started the emulator revolution. At the same time, the Internet was starting to really take off. This allowed programmers to better share their works and communicate with each other to compare notes. It also made it easier for those few with the ability to make ROM images to share them with others. This brings us to a legal technicality. While there is (generally), nothing illegal about creating or using an emulator, most of the games they run are still the property of the companies and individuals who created them. Their copyrights won't expire for many years yet, and some companies are intent on defending them, as is their right under the law. Thus I feel I must point out that it is illegal to download ROMs from the Internet, particularly if you don't own the actual game.

The laws regarding "backing up" software muddy the issue some. Technically, the owner is supposed to back up his own software. However, since all copies are identical, once you've downloaded a copy, how could anyone tell that you hadn't done it yourself? Second, there are some questions as to whether laws allowing the backing up of software apply to software distributed on a robust medium like a cartridge. As best I know, these particular issues have not been tried in court because the companies that own the games don't generally go after the emulator users; they target those that distribute the ROMs on a large scale. Beyond the legal issues are the ethical ones, which I don't have nearly the space to go into here. Suffice it to say, you'll have to sort out for yourself whether breaking these laws is actually harming anyone or not. It's not an easy question to answer.

Regardless of your answer, today you can find an emulator for practically any home console or computer that was popular in its day. And even some that weren't so popular. You can also find emulators for thousands of arcade games. By far, the most popular is the Multiple Arcade Machine Emulator or MAME (www.mame.net), which currently emulates over 2600 unique games. Can you imagine an arcade with 2600 different games??? Well, thanks to emulation, you don't have to imagine it. You can have it in your home, filling up your computer's hard drive.

Date of Release: August 22, 2003 | **Developer:** Monolith Productions | **Publisher:** Buena Vista Games



By Mark Hoogland

TRON 2.0 offers, much like the 1982 movie, a visual extravaganza. It's the video game equivalent of a film negative -- black dominates the inverted sunless world of ***TRON 2.0*** and the game's designers captured the essence of the TRON cyberscape: bold neon color starkly contrasts with an otherwise featureless black world. The music, from original TRON composer Wendy Carlos, adds a surreal synthetic touch. Playing ***TRON 2.0*** is a lot of fun, mostly because exploring the neon maze of each succeeding level is so enjoyable. Of course, there are some problems. The forgettable story fails to include Flynn at all -- aside from some boring emails -- and Alan is even blander than he was in TRON. Fatherhood, it seems, has reinforced all of Alan's staid impulses.

Alan's son, Jet Bradley, is our hero…but he's a rebellious jerk. Jet gradually improves, but he's annoying for far too long. His "love interest," a program named Mercury, steals the show with her sleek appearance, wit, and roguish demeanor. The Kernel, a powerful ICP program who shares management techniques with Darth Vader, is the most memorable character. He'll also remind you of Sark, of course, as will the garish red outfits of the ICPs. The antiquated program I-No and the corrupt Thorne are intriguing as well.

For fans of the film, the levels featuring an obsolete program named I-No are likely to be the most fun. Jet finds himself wandering around an ancient computer world as he searches for an old program. In his path are the classic TRON tanks (deadly, of course) from the film and "resource hog" programs. I-No is an amusing fuddy-duddy, and manages to make several quips that elucidate just how much computer technology has changed in the last 20 years. Perhaps to emphasize just how antiquated this world is, the levels are dramatically different in appearance -- they resemble Egypt with pyramids.

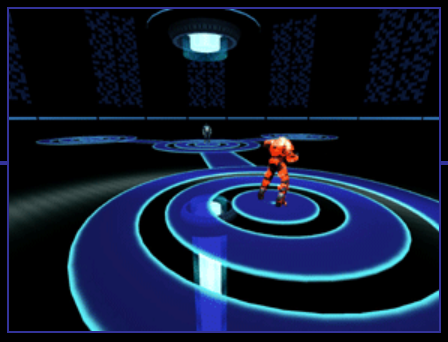
The gameplay is fairly straightforward shooting action, but there are a number of interesting twists. The weapons aren't typical at all. TRON's disc is back, and it's a versatile offensive and defensive weapon. As Jet progresses, however, he accesses a variety of energy programs that he can utilize, and some of them are surprisingly novel. An energy-sucking claw allows Jet to recharge his health while damaging opponents, much like a vampiric-touch spell from a D&D game. An energy blob weapon fires clusters of explosive green blob grenades. It's an interesting combination of a rocket/grenade launcher – the straight shot of a rocket, but the slow lobbing speed of a grenade. In the end though, the disc is the most important weapon, as it should be. It's the only weapon that doesn't cost energy, and energy is scarce. When fighting ICPs, the disc-block is a deadly weapon, though it does require a good deal of practice to employ effectively. But it's well worth it, because the later battles against multiple ICPs are tough.

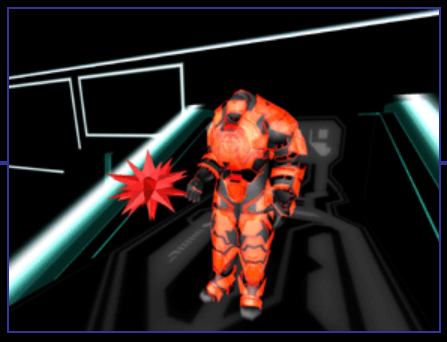
As Jet earns experience, he gains levels and must decide how to allocate his new abilities. The process is familiar to anyone familiar with the RPG "leveling-up" process. Jet will also discover new sub-programs -- some weapons, some defensive, some sensory-- and a very limited supply of upgrade programs (which, disturbingly enough, look like T-cells from an AIDS education video). These upgrade cells allow a sub-program to be improved, and players must decide what to upgrade. These decisions dramatically affect game play, since a fully upgraded weapon is extremely effective. For instance, players could decide to upgrade a short-range specialty weapon and the "quiet shoes" program and then employ a strategy of sneaking up on unwitting ICPs. Alternatively, several available sniper or assault-rifle weapons will dictate different strategies.

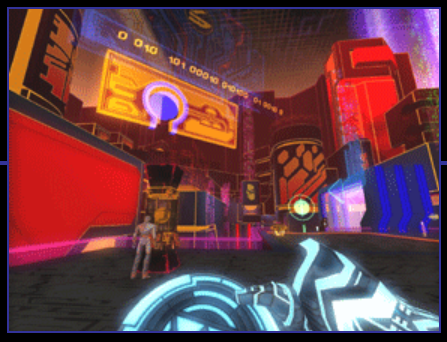
Strategy isn't an option in the light cycle arena, however -- it's reflexes, reaction time, and upgraded cycles. ***TRON 2.0*** incorporates several light-cycle races into the story, and players are also free to race against other humans online or compete in a series of separate tournaments. It's an interesting diversion, especially because the races are completely different from the majority of the action in ***TRON 2.0***. There are some annoyances, though -- the computer racers are unbelievable at the higher difficulty settings, and quite hard enough on the easy settings. The degree of precision necessary for the hairpin maneuvers is frustrating. And then, of course, the computer riders taunt you. "Too slow!"

TRON aficionados will probably be a bit disappointed with ***TRON 2.0***. "*Don't send a bit to do a byte's job*," as Byte would say. The characters are disappointing, with the notable exception of Byte (who's legitimately funny), and the charismatic Flynn is gone (Jet is certainly no Flynn). However, the gameplay is challenging and the visual spectacle of 2.0 is worth experiencing, even if it's missing much of what made TRON a cult success.

Rating







It's always early in the morning that I get the nuttiest ideas. One Thursday morning around four a.m. I was having trouble sleeping, so I started to think about '70s TV shows. (No, I'm not sure why either, but just bear with me.) *Laverne & Shirley* popped into my mind, which led to a recollection of seeing a picture of Cindy "Shirley" Williams with a ***Pac-Man*** machine in her personal game room in the early '80s. I also recalled that Hugh Hefner has a game room filled with classic goodness, and John Mellencamp was rumored to have quite the coin-op collection as well. Which got me to thinking... wouldn't it be fun to do some investigative work, and find out what the favorite games of celebrities are?

But how to best contact them? I wasn't too keen on printing up letters and licking stamp after stamp after stamp, so I did a little AltaVista search on "celebrity email addresses." BINGO! Several sites popped up, filled with the hope of a brush with greatness! I took notes, and soon I had a monster list of celebs to email. One by one, I sent them the following email:

Hi (celebrity)!

My name is Kyle Snyder, staff writer for *Classic Gamer Magazine*, and I was wondering if I could find out something unique (and harmless) about yourself.

What is your all-time favorite video game to play, and why? Either a modern game or something you played years ago. It can be an arcade game, or home game, just which video game would you say is your all-time guilty pleasure?

I've been writing for *Classic Gamer Magazine*, a magazine that covers the "retro video gaming scene" (www.classicgamer.com). We write about Atari, Intellivision, Nintendo, Pac-Man, Space Invaders, and the like. I write several articles per issue, and I thought that an article that tells what the all time favorite games of celebrities are, might be rather interesting.

So, would there be a chance that you would be willing to lend your name and game to my article? I'd be honored to hear back from you!

Thank you so much, -Kyle Snyder :^)

Now, I honestly thought if I'd get maybe two or three responses, I'd be lucky. Fame is not without its price, and one of those costs is a drastic lack of leisure time. If anybody does reply, I'm sure it'll be weeks after I send the email out, maybe even months! Plus, it's highly likely that the email addresses I was uncovering would be out-of-date, or possibly just invalid addresses created as "filler" to make the celebrity email site look well stocked. This seemed to explain the number of addresses which seemed too goofy (Tom Cruise is supposedly at AGOODACTOR@AOL.COM!) or just too damn obvious to be real (Christina@Aguilera.com comes to mind).

So, I forged ahead, and favored the email addies that seemed promising. Within 24 hours, I had my first two responses, and I was invigorated! Over the next few weeks, I'd send out maybe 50 or so queries a week, until I received enough responses to make up this article. Truth be told, celebrity responses are still trickling in as you read, so a "chapter two" of this article may already be in the works.

"Games of Fame" was not without it's frustrations, however, as I received a handful of questionable responses. Primarily from publicists or agents of celebs, most of whom claimed that their celeb has EVER played a video game. Puh-lease. I don't doubt that the publicist has never HEARD OF or SEEN their client playing a game, but how do they know that they weren't hooked on ***Galaxian*** 20 years ago? But since I'd have to go through the publicist to get to the celebrity in question, the world may never know.

To be fair, a few publicists were very helpful, and asked the celeb on my behalf. I reprinted the replies exactly as I received them, so a few are not direct responses from the celebrity in question, but do contain the answer we're all waiting for! For those responses, I have removed the publicist's name in the interest of their privacy.

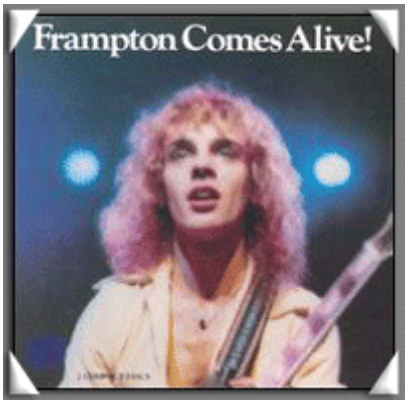
Let me also say that I have listed these celebrities in no particular order. So without further ado...

"Hello! It would be my pleasure to answer your question. First, I will admit, video games ARE one of my "guilty pleasures." In my younger days, I would play ***Mario Bros.*** *and* ***Duck Hunt*** *for hours at a time. Nowadays video games are unbelievable! I mean, with NFL2K (series), it almost looks like a real football game at times. So, whether it is old or new, video games always keep me entertained. So, to answer your question, here are some of my favorites:* ***NFL2K***, ***NBA2K, Mario Bros., Duck Hunt, Crazy Taxi, Final Fantasy*** *(all) and* ***Metal Gear****."*

- My Best To You,
Brian McKnight

"All time fav would have to be ***Ted Nugent Wild Hunting Adventure****, by Gonzo Games, natch!"*

-Ted Nugent

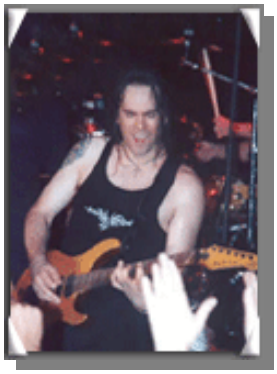


Dear Kyle,

"I spoke with Peter and he is still playing the original ***Tetris****! So, he's a bit behind, but still playing. I hope this helps!"*

"Thanks so much for writing, To tell you the truth, I don't really have an ALL time favorite game! I do like ***Pac-Man*** *and* ***Mario****, though!"*

- Jessica Simpson



"Hi Kyle -
I spent many hours on ***Super Mario*** *in the band house before we got our recording contract.*

Kind regards....."

-

Bill Leverty

"Well I guess I started with ***Pong*** *and* ***Pac-Man,*** *but really haven't been into gaming that much, unless you consider* ***Flight Simulator*** *a game. I don't, I learned to fly real planes with it."*

-Roger McGuinn
The Byrds

*"We appreciate your interest in Ms. Margolis. She's presently out of town, however I presented your inquiry and she said to tell you that she would be happy to participate in your article. Her all-time favorite video game is **Ms. Pac-Man**!"*

-Regards,
Cindy Margolis, Inc.

*"No problem! My favorite all time game is **Star Wars Episode 1**, I like any games that have to do with racing! Talk to you soon! Can I have a copy? "*

-Bye,
Shiloh McCormick!

*"On Atari, I'd say it had to be either **Combat** or the **Spider-Man** game. My cousin had Intellivision, and we'd play what I believe was called Madden's Football (ed note: **NFL Football**?) when I visited. On ColecoVision, it had to be **Donkey Kong**. On Sega Genesis it was either **EA Sports NHL '95**, or **The Adventures of Rocky and Bullwinkle**. On Nintendo it was Sunsoft's **Superman** game (the one that followed the Death of Superman storyline), closely followed by the **Batman** Animated Series game. On Sega Saturn (yes, I bought a Sega Saturn) it was...(The name escapes me, but you know what I'm talking about: it was a martial arts game in which you could be a bunch of characters, like the Drunken Master or Sarah or Akira; my brain's kind of fried this morning, so if you can just insert name of said game, I'd be appreciative). ((Writer's note: **Virtua Fighter 2**!)) On PlayStation One, it's the incredible **Spider-Man** game.*

-Kevin Smith

*"I was mesmerized by **Cosmology of Kyoto**, and would love to see a sequel making use of newer technology. It allows you to explore the streets and buildings of the ancient city and meet the people. Characters in video games are more interesting if they are not merely targets."*

- Roger Ebert

*"I liked **Asteroids** the best. I guess I enjoy blowing stuff up. I'm just finishing up a Dilbert video game that features Dilbert on skates eating food that falls from the sky. If he eats healthy food he extends his life, if he eats bad food he gets fat and dies. It's a good lesson for the kids. It's to advertise my line of nutritious foods, the Dilberito (tm). Look for it on dilbert.com and dilberito.com."*

- Scott Adams

*"My favorite game was **Adventure** written by Willy Crowther in the mid-1970s. I was also addicted to all the Infocom text games (**Wishbringer**, **Sorceror**, etc.) and occasionally I go back to try them again. I still think they are better than the super-graphic 3D games because my imagination is better than any artist's rendering!"*

-Vint Cerf
("Father of the Internet")

So there you have it. Celebrities from all walks of fame enjoy video games! A hearty *Classic Gamer* thank you to all the celebrities whom were kind enough to contribute their stories and opinions. Thanks a bunch!

-Kyle Snyder

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Featured ending

Super Mario World 2: Yoshi's Island (SNES, 1995)

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